

The Irregular at Magic High School

Reminiscence Arc



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The
Irregular
at
Magic High
School



My brother became my Guardian when I was six. If I became the family head, he would be my shadow until his death.

As long as I don't relieve him of his duty as my Guardian... ..he will follow me. He chases me from behind. I can't get away from him.

Miyuki Shiba

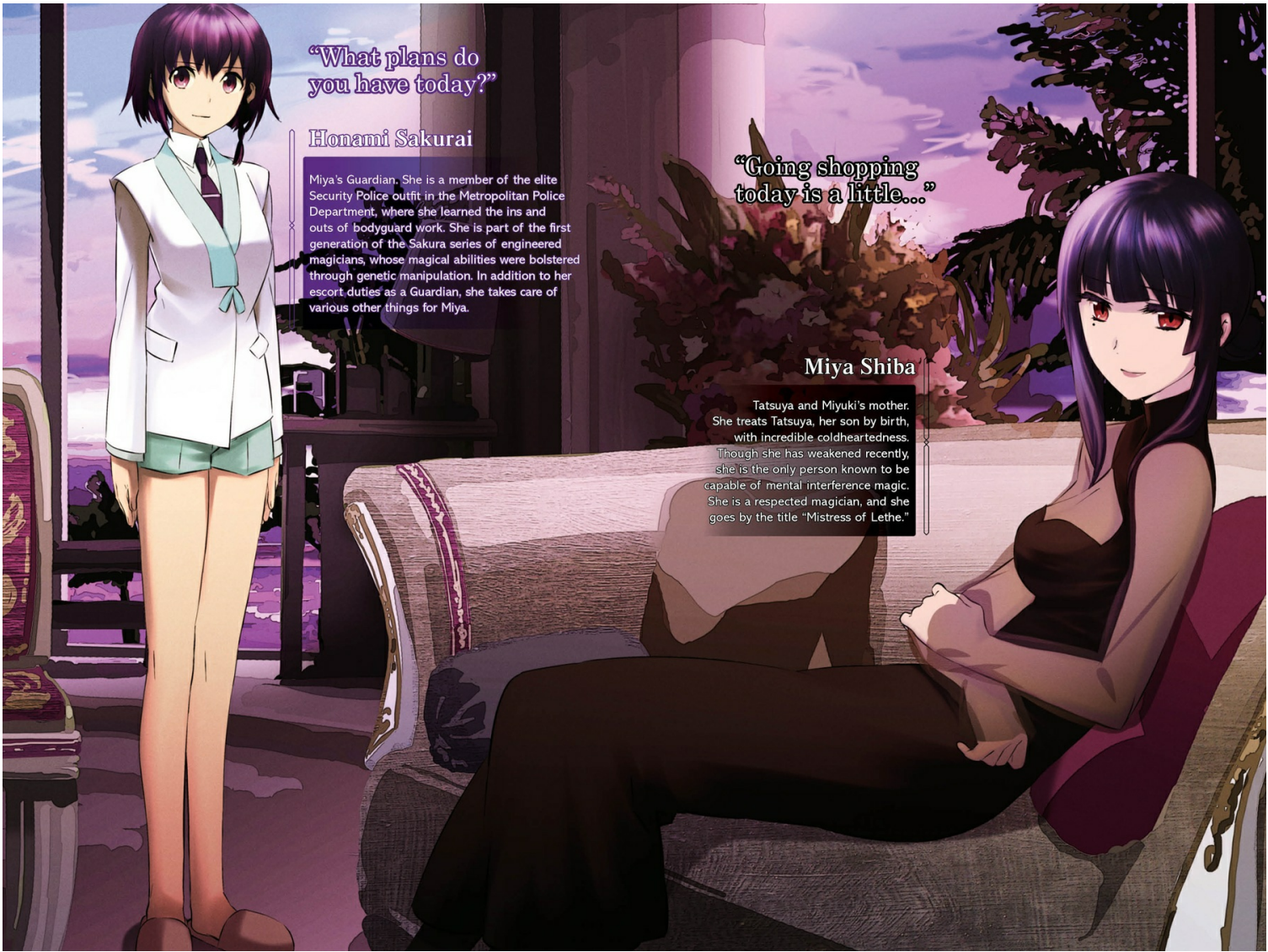
A freshman in middle school. She is a candidate for the next head of the Yotsuba, a family in the Ten Master Clans, a group comprising Japan's strongest magic technicians. The current head of the family is her aunt, Maya Yotsuba. Miyuki has young, graceful looks, which have improved in recent years. Specializing in cooling spells, she shows a great aptitude for magic.

He can't run from me. I'm the one who won't let him escape. He's the one who isn't able to escape. Even though I'm the only one who can let him go back to being a normal middle school student... ..I don't know how to deal with my brother.

Tatsuya Shiba

A freshman in middle school. Miyuki's Guardian. He doesn't show much emotion, even to his mother, Miya, and sister, Miyuki, making it impossible for others to know what he's thinking. In order to serve as Miyuki's bodyguard, he has received advanced martial arts training, and his abilities rival those of even adult soldiers.





“What plans do you have today?”

Honami Sakurai

Miya's Guardian. She is a member of the elite Security Police outfit in the Metropolitan Police Department, where she learned the ins and outs of bodyguard work. She is part of the first generation of the Sakura series of engineered magicians, whose magical abilities were bolstered through genetic manipulation. In addition to her escort duties as a Guardian, she takes care of various other things for Miya.

“Going shopping today is a little...”

Miya Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's mother. She treats Tatsuya, her son by birth, with incredible coldheartedness. Though she has weakened recently, she is the only person known to be capable of mental interference magic. She is a respected magician, and she goes by the title “Mistress of Lethe.”

“They laid a hand on Miyuki.
I must make them pay the price.”

“Tatsuya...”





Shigeru Sanada

First lieutenant in the Japan Ground Defense Force. He is assigned to weapons research and development. He has enough proficiency with CADs to customize military devices by himself.

“Tatsuya Shiba,
we will add you to
our line of battle.”

Harunobu Kazama

Captain in the Japan Ground Defense Force. He possesses a distinctive dignity and refined manner. He also serves as an instructor to the paratrooper magician unit stationed at Onna Base in Okinawa.

State of the World in 2095

World War III, also called the Twenty Years' Global War Outbreak, was directly triggered by global cooling, and it fundamentally redrew the world map.

The USA annexed Canada and the countries from Mexico to Panama to form the United States of North America, or the USNA.

Russia reabsorbed Ukraine and Belarus to form the New Soviet Union.

China conquered northern Burma, northern Vietnam, northern Laos, and the Korean Peninsula to form the Great Asian Alliance, or GAA.

India and Iran absorbed several central Asian countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan) and South Asian countries (Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) to form the Indo-Persian Federation.

The other Asian and Arab countries formed regional military alliances to resist the three superpowers: the New Soviet Union, GAA, and the Indo-Persian Federation.

Australia chose national isolation.

The EU failed to unify and split into an eastern and a western section bordered by Germany and France. These east-west groupings also failed to form unions and now are actually weaker than they were before unification.

Africa saw half its nations destroyed altogether, with the surviving ones barely managing to retain urban control.

South America, excluding Brazil, fell into small, isolated states administered on a local government level.

Strategic Magicians: the Thirteen Apostles

Because modern magic was born into a highly technological world, only a few nations were able to develop strong magic for military purposes. As a result, only a handful were able to develop "strategic magic," which rivaled weapons of mass destruction.

However, these nations shared the magic they developed with their allies, and certain magicians of allied nations with high aptitudes for strategic magic came to be known as strategic magicians.

As of April 2095, there are officially thirteen magicians publicly recognized as strategic magicians by their nations. They are called the Thirteen Apostles and are seen as important factors in the world's military balance. The Thirteen Apostles' nations, names, and spell names are listed below.

USNA

Angie Sirius: Heavy Metal Burst
Elliott Miller: Leviathan
Laurent Barthes: Leviathan

* The only one belonging to the Stars is Angie Sirius. Elliott Miller is stationed at Alaska Base, and Laurent Barthes outside the country at Gibraltar Base, and for the most part they don't move.

New Soviet Union

Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov: Tuman Bomba
Leonid Kondratenko: Zemlja Armija

* As Kondratenko is of advanced age, he generally stays at the Black Sea Base.

Great Asian Alliance

Yunde Liu: Pilita (Thunderclap Tower)

* Yunde Liu died in the October 31, 2095, battle against Japan.

Indo-Persian Federation

Barat Chandra Khan: Agni Downburst

Japan

Mio Itsuwa: Abyss

Brazil

Miguel Diez: Synchroliner Fusion

* This magic program was named by the USNA.

England

William MacLeod: Ozone Circle

Germany

Karla Schmidt: Ozone Circle

* Ozone Circle is based on a spell co-developed by nations in the EU before its split as a means to fix the hole in the ozone layer. The magic program was perfected by England and then publicized to the old EU through a convention.

Turkey

Ali Sahin: Bahamut

* This magic program was developed in cooperation with the USNA and Japan, then provided to Turkey by Japan.

Thailand

Somchai Bunnag: Agni Downburst

* This magic program was provided by Indo-Persia.

The Irregular at Magic High School

REMINISCENCE ARC

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Illustration Kana Ishida

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THE IRREGULAR AT MAGIC HIGH SCHOOL

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An irregular older brother with a certain flaw.

An honor roll younger sister who is perfectly flawless.

*When the two siblings enrolled in Magic High School, a dramatic
life unfolded—*

Character



Tatsuya Shiba

Class 1-E. One of the Course 2 (irregular) students, who are mockingly called Weeds. Sees right to the core of everything.



Miyuki Shiba

Class 1-A. Tatsuya's younger sister; enrolled as the top student. Specializes in freezing magic. Dotes on her older brother.



Leonhard Saijou

Class 1-E. Tatsuya's classmate. Specializes in hardening magic. Has a bright personality.



Erika Chiba

Class 1-E. Tatsuya's classmate. Specializes in *kenjutsu*. A charming troublemaker.



Mizuki Shibata

Class 1-E. Tatsuya's classmate. Has pushion radiation sensitivity. Serious and a bit of an airhead.



Mikihiko Yoshida

Class 1-E. Tatsuya's classmate. From a famous family that uses ancient magic. Has known Erika since they were children.



Honoka Mitsui

Class 1-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in light-wave vibration magic. Impulsive when emotional.



Shizuku Kitayama

Class 1-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in vibration and acceleration magic. Doesn't show emotional ups and downs very much.



Subaru Satomi

Class 1-D. Frequently mistaken for a pretty boy. Cheerful and easy to get along with.



Akaha Sakurakouji

Class 1-B. Friends with Subaru and Amy. Wears gothic Lolita clothes and loves theme parks.



Azusa Nakajou

A junior and is student council president after Mayumi stepped down. Shy and has trouble expressing herself.



Hanzou Gyoubu-Shoujou Hattori

A junior and the former student council vice president. Is the head of the club committee after Katsuto stepped down.

Koutarou Tatsumi

A senior and a former member of the disciplinary committee. Has a heroic personality.

Isao Sekimoto

A senior. Member of the disciplinary committee. Wasn't chosen for the Thesis Competition.

Shun Morisaki

Class 1-A. Miyuki's classmate. Specializes in CAD quick-draw. Takes great pride in being a Course 1 student.



Eimi Akechi

Class 1-B. A quarter-blood. Full name is Amelia Eimi Akechi Goldie.



Mayumi Saegusa

A senior and the former student council president. One of the strongest magicians ever to grace a magical high school.



Suzune Ichihara

A senior and the former student council treasurer. Calm, collected, and book smart. Mayumi's right hand.



Mari Watanabe

A senior and the former chairwoman of the disciplinary committee. Mayumi's good friend. Good all-around and likes a sporting fight.



Midori Sawaki

A junior and a member of the disciplinary committee. Has a complex about his girlish name.



Kei Isori

A junior and the student council treasurer. Top grades in his class in magical theory. Engaged to Kanon Chiyoda.



Kanon Chiyoda

A junior and the chairwoman of the disciplinary committee after Mari stepped down. Engaged to Kei Isori.



Katsuto Juumonji

A senior and the former head of the club committee.



Masaki Ichijou

A freshman at Third High. Participates in the Nine School Competition. Direct heir to the Ichijou family, one of the Ten Master Clans.



Shinkurou Kichijouji

A freshman at Third High. Participates in the Nine School Competition. Also known as Cardinal George.



Midori Ichijou

Masaki's mother. Warm and good at cooking.

Takeaki Kirihara

A junior. Member of the *kenjutsu* club. Kanto Junior High Kenjutsu Tournament champion.



Sayaka Mibu

A junior. Member of the kendo club. Placed second in the nation at the girls' junior high kendo tournament.



Koharu Hirakawa

Senior. Engineer during the Nine School Competition. Withdrew from the Thesis Competition.

Chiaki Hirakawa

Class 1-G. Holds enmity toward Tatsuya.

Satomi Asuka

Nurse. Gentle, calm, and warm. Smile popular among male students.

Kazuo Tsuzura

Teacher. Main field is magic geometry. Manager of the Thesis Competition team.

Akane Ichijou

Eldest daughter of the Ichijou. Masaki's younger sister. Mature despite being in elementary school.



Ruri Ichijou

Second daughter of the Ichijou. Masaki's younger sister. Stable and does things her own way.



Haruka Ono

A general counselor of Class 1-E.

Harunobu Kazama

Commanding officer of the 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked major.

Shigeru Sanada

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked captain.

Muraji Yanagi

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion. Ranked captain.

Kousuke Yamanaka

Executive officer of the 101st Brigade of the Independent Magic Battalion. Physician ranked major. First-rate healing magician.

Kyouko Fujibayashi

Female officer serving as Kazama's aide. Ranked second lieutenant.

Retsu Kudou

Renowned as the strongest magician in the world. Given the honorary title of Sage.

Sayuri Shiba

Tatsuya and Miyuki's stepmother. Dislikes them.



Zhou

A handsome young man who brought Lu and Chen to Japan.

Yakumo Kokonoe

A user of an ancient magic called *ninjutsu*. Tatsuya's martial arts master.

Toshikazu Chiba

Erika Chiba's oldest brother. Has a career in the Ministry of Police. A playboy at first glance.

Naotsugu Chiba

Erika Chiba's second-oldest brother. Possesses full mastery of the Chiba (thousand blades) style of *kenjutsu*. Nicknamed "Kirin Child of the Chiba."

Ushiyama

Manager of Four Leaves Technology's CAD R & D Section 3. A person in whom Tatsuya places his trust.

Rin

A girl Morisaki saved. Her full name is Meiling Sun. The new leader of the Hong Kong-based international crime syndicate No-Head Dragon.



Xiangshan Chen

Leader of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Has a heartless personality.



Ganghu Lu

The ace magician of the Great Asian Alliance Army's Special Covert Forces. Also known as the Man-Eating Tiger.



Glossary



Course 1 student emblem



Tatsuya Shiba's CAD



Miyuki Shiba's CAD

Magic High School

Nickname for high schools affiliated with the National Magic University. There are nine schools throughout the nation. Of them, First High through Third High each adopt a system of Course 1 and Course 2 students to split up its two hundred incoming freshmen.

Blooms, Weeds

Slang terms used at First High to display the gap between Course 1 and Course 2 students. Course 1 student uniforms feature an eight-petaled emblem embroidered on the left breast, but Course 2 student uniforms do not.

CAD (Casting Assistant Device)

A device that simplifies magic casting. Magical programming is recorded within. There are many types and forms, some specialized and others multipurpose.

Four Leaves Technology (FLT)

A domestic CAD manufacturer. Originally more famous for magical-product engineering than for developing finished products, the development of the Silver model has made them much more widely known as a maker of CADs.

Taurus Silver

A genius engineer said to have advanced specialized CAD software by a decade in just a single year.

Eidos (individual information bodies)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy. In modern magic, *eidos* refers to the information bodies that accompany events. They form a so-called record out in the world, and can be considered the footprints of an object's state of being in the universe, be that active or passive. The definition of *magic* in its modern form is that of a technology that alters events by altering the information bodies composing them.

Idea (information body dimension)

Originally a term from Greek philosophy; pronounced "ee-dee-ah." In modern magic, *Idea* refers to the *platform* upon which information bodies are recorded—a spell, object, or energy's *dimension*. Magic is primarily a technology that outputs a magic program (a spell sequence) to affect the Idea (the dimension), which then rewrites the *eidos* (the individual bodies) recorded there.

Activation Sequence

The blueprints of magic, and the programming that constructs it. Activation sequences are stored in a compressed format in CADs. The magician sends a psionic wave into the CAD, which then expands the data and uses it to convert the activation sequence into a signal. This signal returns to the magician with the unpacked magic program.

Psions (thought particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spirit phenomena. These information particles record awareness and thought results. Eidos are considered the theoretical basis for modern magic, while activation sequences and magic programs are the technology forming its practical basis. Yet, all of these are bodies of information made up of psions.

Pushions (spirit particles)

Massless particles belonging to the dimension of spirit phenomena. Their existence has been confirmed, but their true form and function have yet to be elucidated. In general, magicians are only able to sense energized pushions.

Magician

An abbreviation of *magic technician*. *Magic technician* is the term for those with the skills to use magic at a practical level.

Magic program

An information body used to temporarily alter information attached to events. Constructed from psions possessed by the magician.

Magic-calculation region

A mental region that constructs magic programs. The essential core of the talent of magic. Exists within the magician's unconscious regions, and though he or she can normally consciously use the magic-calculation region, they cannot perceive the processing happening within. The magic-calculation region may be called a black box, even for the magician performing the task.

Magic program output process

- ❶ Transmit an activation sequence to a CAD. This is called "reading in an activation sequence."
- ❷ Add variables to the activation sequence and send them to the magic-calculation region.
- ❸ Construct a magic program from the activation sequence and its variables.
- ❹ Send the constructed magic program along the "route"—the lowest part of the conscious mind to highest part of the unconscious mind—then send it out the "gate" between conscious and unconscious and output it onto the Idea.
- ❺ The magic program outputted onto the Idea interferes with the eidōs at a designated coordinate and overwrites them.

With a single-type, single-process spell, this five-stage process can be completed in under half a second. This is the bar for practical-level use with magicians.

Magic evaluation standards

The speed with which one constructs psionic information bodies is one's magical throughput, or processing speed. The scale and scope of the information bodies one can construct is one's magical capacity. The strength with which one can overwrite eidōs with magic programs is one's influence. These three together are referred to as a person's magical power.

Cardinal Code hypothesis

A school of thought that claims, of the four families and eight types of magic, within which exists a natural foundation of "plus" and "minus" magic programs (sixteen in all), one can construct every possible typed spell by combining these sixteen.

Typed magic

Any magic belonging to the four families and eight types.

Exotyped magic

A term for spells that control mental phenomena rather than physical ones. Encompasses many fields, from divine magic and spirit magic—which employs spiritual presences—to mind reading, astral form separation, and consciousness control.

Ten Master Clans

The most powerful magician organization in Japan. The ten families are chosen every four years from among twenty-eight: Ichijou, Ichinokura, Isshiki, Futatsugi, Nikaidou, Nihei, Mitsuya, Mikazuki, Yotsuba, Itsuwa, Gotou, Itsumi, Mutsuzuka, Rokkaku, Rokugou, Roppongi, Saegusa, Shippou, Tanabata, Nanase, Yatsushiro, Hassaku, Hachiman, Kudou, Kuki, Kuzumi, Juumonji, and Tooyama.

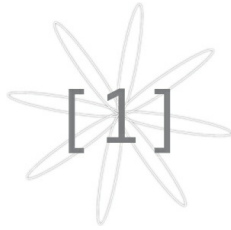
Numbers

Just like the Ten Master Clans contain a number from one to ten in their surname, well-known families in the Hundred Families use numbers eleven or greater, such as Chiyoda (thousand), Isori (fifty), and Chiba (thousand). The value isn't an indicator of strength, but the fact that it is present in the surname is one measure to broadly judge the capacity of a magic family by their bloodline.

Non-numbers

Also called Extra Numbers, or simply Extras. Magician families who have been stripped of their number. Once, when magicians were weapons and experimental samples, this was a stigma between the success cases, who were given numbers, and the failure cases, who didn't display good enough results.





November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

A traditional residence, one styled after a large samurai compound—that was the impression of the Yotsuba main house when seen from outside its gate.

Compared to normal houses, it certainly was big. One might describe it as a mansion, even. But for those who had seen the huge estates of the Saegusa and Ichijou, it had a surprisingly plain and cozy appearance.

The Yotsuba saw the size of their residence as trivial and didn't concern themselves with it. They were a thoroughly secretive clan, so they would never entertain many nonfamily guests. Perhaps they thought it would be little more than an impediment to have a huge mansion to tend.

Miyuki, thinking about the house and the Yotsuba as though she were a total stranger—despite this being the home her mother had been born into—stepped past the oppressive-looking gate alongside her brother.

One week since that day—the day that later generations would know as the Scorching Halloween.

This mountain village wasn't even on the map. The siblings had come here because of an invitation—really a mandatory summons—from their aunt.

They were shown to the parlor and told to wait there. The wide space was more modern than the building's outward appearance implied; rather than the smaller, more private reception room, they'd been sent to the mansion's larger one—which they called the audience chamber. The act indicated that their aunt

had not called them here for a personal matter but instead as the head of the Yotsuba family. However, they'd known all that before coming.

Still, thought Miyuki. Their aunt hadn't called both of them here in three years. She always gave one excuse or another to meet in person only with Miyuki—save for major occasions at which the entire extended family gathered, such as marriages and funerals. Though she typically attended with her brother, it would make three years since their aunt had seen his face up close.

Whether that was a good or bad thing, however, Miyuki couldn't decide.

"Don't worry. We're not the same as we were three years ago."

Her unease must have shown on her face. She stole an upturned glance at Tatsuya, to which he nodded reassuringly.

—Since he was standing next to the sofa Miyuki was sitting on.

He'd been standing three years ago, too. Right there behind her.

"Yes...we are."

Tatsuya was probably referring to how different their abilities were now. Which was true—they'd both grown so much stronger that they couldn't be compared to their past selves. In particular, Tatsuya had reached a power level rivaling that of their aunt, who was known as the Demon of the East and the Queen of the Night, and she was said to be the strongest magician in the world. Considering how their magic matched up against each other, he would be sure to win a one-on-one fight.

But something more important than our power relation to our aunt has changed in these three years, thought Miyuki.

The relationship between Miyuki and her brother.

The feelings she had for him.

She adjusted her posture, sinking deeper into the sofa as she thought back to the events of three years ago...



August 4, AD 2092

Okinawa

Naha Airport—Beach House in Seragaki, Onna

Because of the rapid decrease in the planet's temperature that started in the 2030s, the world's crop situation had taken a turn for the worse. First World countries, thanks to advances in sunlight plants for agricultural production, saw only limited damage, but in newly developing countries, whose quick economic growth had been accelerating explosions in their populations, the impact had been devastating.

The place that faced the worst predicament had been northern China, where cooling and desertification had been happening at the same time. Those living in that region had tried to overcome the crisis with their own ethnic traditions. They did so through border-crossing emigration—in other words, illegal immigration.

Russia, however, decided not to allow an influx of illegal entrants. Even in the uninhabited wilderness, they aggressively eliminated any illegal immigrants who would have stolen the whole house if they were given any space under the eaves.

They used force, regardless of the blood they shed.

China censured Russia in the name of human rights, and Russia criticized China in the name of international law. Their antagonism didn't stop at their borders, either; the same situation was repeated elsewhere.

Fuses were being lit all over the world. Its backdrop was the food shortage

caused by the climate shift, but nations were scrambling for energy resources as well.

It only took a minor event for the clock to strike midnight. In AD 2045, World War III—the Twenty Years' Global War Outbreak—began.

The years from 2045 to 2065 were a tumultuous era comprising large-scale national conflicts worldwide. It was a true world war, in which not a single country could remain as a bystander.

By the end of the war, the world's population had decreased to one-third of what it was at the beginning of the bloodshed in 2045, to three billion people.

Russia reabsorbed the Ukraine and Belarus to become the New Soviet Union (NSU). China seized control of northern Burma, northern Vietnam, northern Laos, and the Korean Peninsula to become the Great Asian Alliance (GAA). India and Iran engulfed the central Asian nations to form the Indo-Persian Federation. The USA absorbed Canada and Mexico to become the United States of North America (USNA). And they all expanded. In contrast, the European Union failed to unite, splitting into an eastern and a western portion. In Africa, half of the countries were destroyed along with their states, while South America, Brazil excluded, had plummeted into a concatenation of microstates governed at the local level.

Thanks to the earnest efforts of an international group of magicians, the Twenty Years' Global War, which changed the world so completely, didn't escalate into thermonuclear war.

In AD 2046, the International Magic Association was born. Its goal was to forcibly prevent the usage of weapons with radioactive properties that would damage the planet's environment beyond recovery.

For the singular purpose of preventing nuclear weapon usage, these magicians were permitted to break free of the shackles binding them to their own nations and intervene in conflicts using force. As soon as the threat of nuclear weapon usage became clear, even the magicians who had been killing one another on the front lines stopped their conflicts and worked together, regardless of nationality, to prevent it.

The prevention of nuclear arms usage was defined as the utmost priority for

every magician in the world. The targets stated in the International Magic Association Charter were weapons that polluted the environment via radioactive substances. Strictly speaking, pure nuclear fusion bombs didn't fall into that category. However, the technological situation during the war required small atomic fission bombs to ignite the nuclear fusion ones, meaning that all thermonuclear weapons were prohibited. Because of this, thermonuclear weapons weren't used a single time during those turbulent twenty years of warfare.

The International Magic Association was recognized for this achievement and designated an international peace agency, an honorable position even in the postwar world...

Once I heard the announcement to fasten our seat belts, I closed the educational file meant for magicians titled "A Primer on Modern History." It was a little hard for me to read, because I'd just started middle school, but I liked that; I wasn't bored.

Someone once told me that it would take more than a few waves from digital devices to cause modern airplanes to have problems flying. But powering them down when the plane took off and landed was a customary show of manners. It wasn't only me—the other passengers were turning their devices off, too. Nobody here was childishly rebelling against common sense.

Protective, egg-shaped shields came over the seats, displaying real-time images of the southern islands.

As I looked at the vivid greenery and the glittering sea, it made the global cooling seem like a story out of a novel.

But without a doubt, it had happened.

The planet's climate had begun to warm again by the time we were born, but one could see several remnants from the cooling nearby.

For example, the dress code. The unspoken rule not to show much skin was clearly a remnant from when the cooling had reached its peak.

Well, I wasn't interested in dresses that showed my shoulders or chest—they wouldn't look good on me yet anyway—and it wasn't like people demanded

you wore skirts long enough that their hems would drag on the ground. Because I liked Japanese clothing, the rule didn't restrict me at all personally, so whatever.

As I was thinking through these mundane ideas, the airplane made its approach to Naha Airport. There was almost no turbulence as we landed.

I unbuckled my seat belt—it didn't mean anything; it was just there to be there—and opened up the shield on my capsule seat.

The normal seats farther back in the plane were packed in rows so tight that people's elbows would bump together. I wouldn't be able to tolerate an hour sitting so close to someone I've never even met.

After waiting for Mother to come out of her seat, we went to the exit together.

We were on a private family vacation during summer break. You might think family vacations were naturally private affairs, but for us, most of them weren't, so I was in an uncharacteristically excited mood.

It wasn't just me and my mother, though. If there was one fly in the ointment, it was that *he* was with us, too.



When we entered the members' tea lounge in the arrival lobby, my brother was there, having brought our things.

We hadn't made him do something else by himself to upset him or anything.

They let the passengers in executive class off the plane first. We would have priority in having our luggage returned as well, but we would still need to wait a short while. Because our luggage wasn't ready immediately, having my brother, who was in normal class, go get the suitcases for us wouldn't waste any time.

And there was a good reason he was in a normal seat by himself, too. The executive class seating was watched over by not only the normal cabin attendants but also security officers trained in de-escalation. If a crime were to happen, like a hijacking or a suicide bomber, it would be in normal class, where security was lighter. My brother had been given a normal seat as a precaution should the worst come to pass.

Nevertheless, even I understood that this wasn't how normal families did things.

As I walked with my mother, I spared a glance over my shoulder. *He* was pushing the cart with our luggage on it with a natural air, accompanying us silently, without a grimace.

Just like always.

It wasn't as though I hated him.

I just found him difficult to deal with.

I never knew what he was thinking.

Why was he okay with accepting the duties of a servant—no, being an actual servant—when he was part of the family?

I knew it was because this was the role he'd been given. And I knew our family was unique, too.

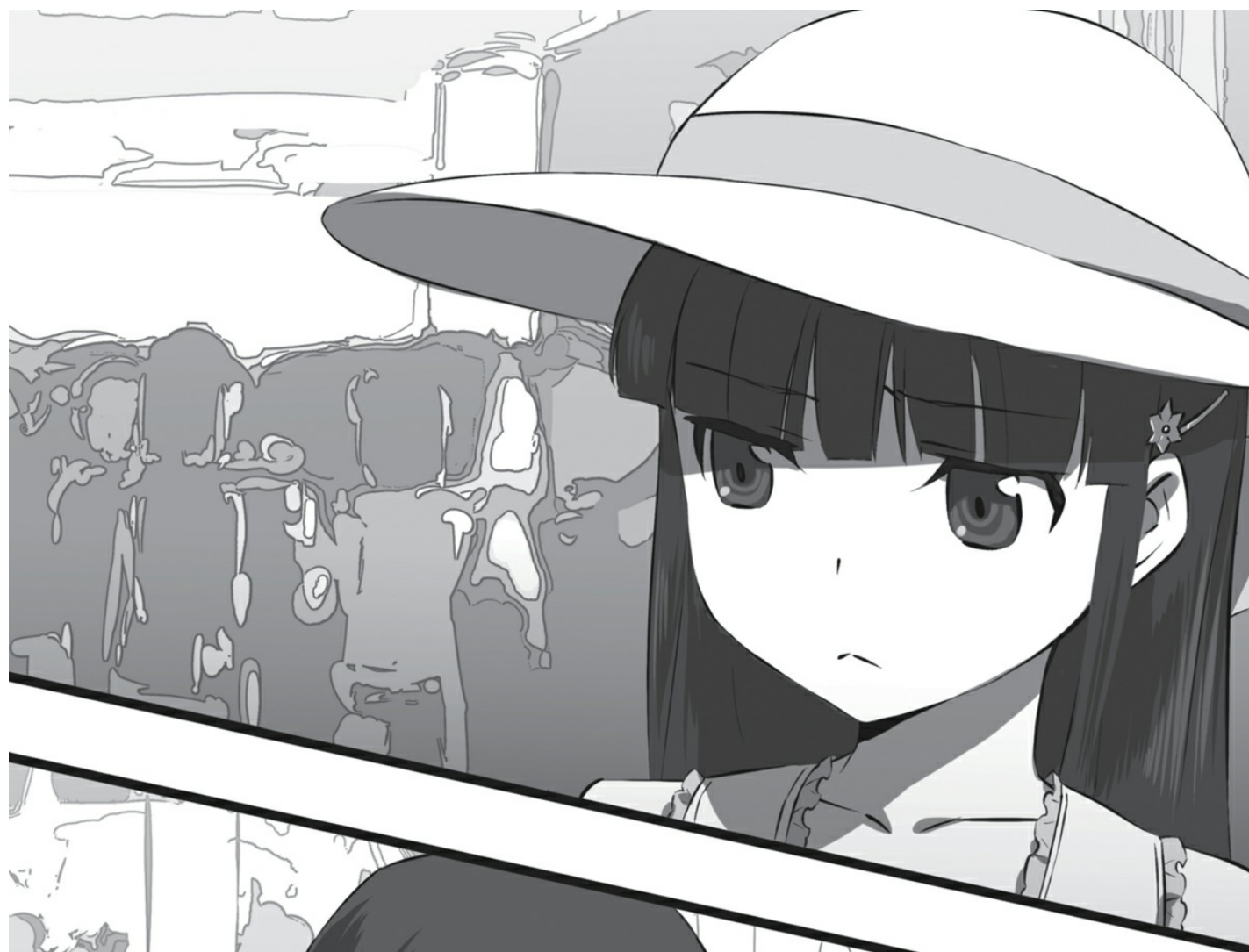
But he was still only in his first year of middle school, like me. He was born in April, and I was born in March. Born within a year of each other, our being in the same grade had been a coincidence thanks to the months, but it didn't change that until this March, he'd been in elementary school like me.

Why was he okay with his little sister bossing him around—?

Our eyes met.

He must have started to wonder why I kept looking back at him.

"...What is it?" he asked.



Logically, I knew that he'd looked at me because I'd been glancing at him. But the only thing that came out of my mouth was displeasure.

"It's nothing."

He had responded to me in a polite way, like a butler employed by a housemistress. No kindness or disgust, no fraternal love or familial animosity. Not one emotion a relative might have come to my brother's face.

"Please don't stare at me. It's unpleasant!"

I knew I was being unfair. I was the one treating him like a servant. He hadn't wanted me to do this. And yet, I used him as an outlet for my self-centered irritation.

"My apologies," he said, stopping and bowing his head to me.

Then he continued to follow us, with slightly more distance than before.

Why? I thought. I was being selfish. *I probably seem like a mean girl.*

...I really didn't know how to deal with him.



For this vacation, we'd be staying at a beach house in Seragaki, Onna, that we'd just bought. I would have been fine with a hotel, but Mother gets jittery when a lot of people are around, so my father arranged it in a hurry.

As always, that man seems to think he can buy love with money—even though he acquired that wealth by marrying Mother.

That man, I hear, was extraordinary when he was young, too. Even as a magician—because of his nonstandard psion capacity, people rated his potential abilities highly... But under the current magic skill system, psion capacity didn't affect your magical talent anymore. In the end, he couldn't make his potential ability into anything real, so he gave up on establishing himself as a magician. Now he's an executive in the company Mother's family made.

Because of all that, I understood why he felt a sense of inferiority when it came to Mother, but as his daughter, I wish he'd show a little more paternal reliability.

...I shook my head, driving the boring ideas from it. We'd come all this way on vacation, and I realized it would be foolish to let unpleasant thoughts bother me.

"Welcome, my lady. And Miyuki and Tatsuya as well—it's good to see you."

When we got to the beach house, Honami Sakurai was there to greet us, having come slightly earlier to do the cleaning and shopping.

She was Mother's Guardian. Until five years ago, Miss Sakurai had been in the Security Police unit of the Metropolitan Police Department. They resisted her retirement quite strongly, but my family had decided before she started working there that she would be Mother's Guardian. Going into the MPD was so she could learn the ins and outs of the escort business.

She was part of the first generation of the Sakura series of physically adjusted magicians, whose magic faculties had been strengthened through genetic engineering. She was created as a magician at a lab near the end of the Twenty Years' Global War, and she was bought by the Yotsuba before she was born.

However, she was so bright and openhearted that you wouldn't be able to guess she had an upbringing like that. Aside from her main duties as Mother's Guardian, she also took care of many smaller tasks for her. In her words, the role of maidservant suited her better.

Normally, Guardians never left the ones they protected. She had because she'd come to the beach house in advance to gather local information, and my brother and I were with Mother anyway. Still, I wished the roles of Miss Sakurai and my brother had been reversed—but that wouldn't have worked, since my brother couldn't prepare a living space like that.

"Come in, all of you. I've already chilled the barley tea. Or shall I put on some hot tea instead?"

"Thank you. I'll have the barley tea, since you've already made it."

"Of course, my lady. Miyuki, Tatsuya, would you like some as well?"

"Yes. Thank you very much."

"Thank you for going out of your way for me."

If there was one thing I didn't like about Miss Sakurai, it was that she treated my brother as Mother's son—and as my brother.

And really, that was only natural.

But I couldn't...do the natural thing.

At the time, I felt chagrined for no reason I could discern.

"Mother, I'm going out for a short walk."

I wasn't in such a hurry that I wanted to go swimming right after arriving, but it felt like a waste to stay cooped up in the beach house, so I decided to go for a walk. Manzamou was a little far to go to on foot, but I was sure it would feel good to take a nice, relaxing walk along the promenade on the beach.

"Miyuki, make sure to take Tatsuya with you."

But after hearing Mother's reply, it felt like my nice stroll had been spoiled before it could begin.

I would have greatly liked to say that I'd be fine on my own, but I didn't want to cause her any needless worry.

"...I will." It took everything I had to keep the edge out of my voice. I pulled a wide-brimmed straw hat over my head and walked out into the setting sunlight without looking back.

The sea breeze fluttering against the hem of my summer dress felt better than I thought it would. I had Miss Sakurai help me put sunscreen on all over, from my toes to my eyelids, so I could feel the wind on my arms and legs without worrying about the sunlight. My skin, covered in the brown cream, made me look almost the same as the local girls. Or so I thought anyway. Thanks to that, I suppose, people didn't stare at me every time I passed, which put me in a good mood.

My skin had never been sunburned, and—not to brag—whenever I was at the beach or somewhere similar, it drew the wrong kind of attention.

...That honestly wasn't a brag.

I still remember the shock I felt when I went with my elementary school friends to the pool, and they said I looked like a ghost. It was a casual remark,

certainly not some kind of bullying or talking behind my back, which made it even more of a shock to me.

I was pretty sure it wasn't because I didn't have enough pigment in my skin. My hair color was very dark black, after all.

Maybe it was genetic? I was fairly sure there'd been no Caucasian blood in our family for the last five generations... Still, I didn't know anything further back than that, so it could have been a really regressive gene, I suppose. But Mother got tan in the summer, too, and *he* was so tanned, you can't tell if his skin was naturally brown or if he had bronzed or what. I didn't think I could put it all down to bloodline.

“...”

I was actively trying to avoid thinking about it, but I thought about it anyway. I fixed my gaze ahead, overly purposeful in not looking behind me... Though as for what that purpose was, exactly—that question almost sent me into confusion.

I couldn't hear his footsteps, even when listening hard. I couldn't sense him, either—though, of course, sensing others' presences was a feat and not one I was able to accomplish to begin with.

But I had no doubt that if I turned around, my brother would be there, a few steps back.

Because he was my Guardian.

I don't really understand why they're called Guardians with a capital *G* instead of just bodyguards. But even back then, I understood how the Yotsuba Guardians were different.

Bodyguard is a job—Guardian is a role.

Bodyguards risked their lives to protect someone and got money in exchange. Sometimes they did it as a full-time job, like in the Security Police, but of course that meant they received salaries in accordance with their duties. So I think, in a broad sense, it's anyone who escorts other people to make money.

Guardians, in contrast, didn't receive any monetary reward. The Yotsuba

provided for all their needs, and if they needed money for something, the Yotsuba would supply it on a case-by-case basis. It wasn't payment but a cost paid to keep the level of care high.

To put it simply, bodyguards worked in order to eat, and Guardians ate in order to work.

Guardians had no personal life. All the men and women who were Guardians were entirely dedicated to their escort, whom they called master or mistress.

My—our—clan considered that normal. If you couldn't consider it as such, in the Yotsuba, you would have to drop out—though if it meant being called something embarrassing like mistress, getting thrown out might be easier. Fortunately for me, the names master and mistress weren't as commonly used these days as the term Guardian.

He had become my Guardian when I was six. He was my first Guardian, and it probably wouldn't ever change. He would live his entire life as the Guardian of the family's main heiress, rather than as the son of the Yotsuba leader's sister, and if and when I became the leader, he would live as my shadow.

As long as I didn't release him from his duty as a Guardian.

Yes—in that one specific case in which a Guardian could be released from their escort, they could abandon their duties and live as a normal person.

He was following me.

He was chasing me from behind.

I couldn't get away from him.

He couldn't run away from me.

I was the one preventing his escape.

The one who couldn't get away was him.

Even though I was the only one who could give him back a normal middle school life.

That person... He couldn't be a normal middle school student because I couldn't force him to quit.

I don't know how to deal with my brother.

It's not like I hate him.

Then, why was I tying him to this life of horrible treatment? I couldn't find the answer. When I tried to think about it, my brain stopped working for some reason.

My eyes firmly fixed at my feet, I sped up the pace.

Since I was walking quickly with my head down, when someone grabbed my arm, I almost fell backward. A moment later, I felt a *thud* from in front of me and fell into his chest.

He didn't complain.

I was the one at fault for not looking at anything—and the reason for my reflexive anger was a secret I didn't have any intention of spilling.

The problem was that after my brother stopped me, I felt an impact in front of me. I hadn't bumped into anyone—someone had clearly run into me. This was probably one of those cases where I had a right to be angry.

I looked up, indignation in my eyes. But all I saw was a thick wall of flesh. I raised my eyes farther. Finally, I saw the person who had collided with me.

A big man with black skin wearing a military uniform in a slovenly way—a Leftover Blood.

When the Twenty Years' Global War escalated and the American soldiers (at the time, the country was still called the USA) stationed in Okinawa withdrew to Hawaii, they left children behind. Most of them had fathers who had died in battle, rather than being abandoned by their parents, but I believe many of them were taken into the JDF facilities we'd inherited from the U.S. military bases and ended up as soldiers.

They were lionhearts who carried out their border defense duties magnificently, and many of their own children became soldiers as well. However, warnings about those children—the second generation—were on private sites regarding Okinawan tourism, saying that many of them had bad behavior and to take caution around them.

Behind the big man were two other young men of about the same build, also wearing their uniforms loosely, grinning in an incredibly creepy way.

Reflexive anger gave way to instinctual fear. My mind cowered to such an extent that I couldn't even come up with the obvious solution of using magic if I needed to.

...That is, until his back blocked my vision.

A child's slender back.

But it was still bigger than my own.

Before I knew it, he'd hidden me behind him.

"What's this? We got no use for little runts."

The big man peered into my brother's face, a completely condescending and derisive smile on his lips.

My brother didn't reply.

"So scared you can't even talk, eh?"

"Ha, what a chicken. Quit tryin' to act cool!"

The two people in the rear smirked and tried to intimidate him.

Anger rose again in my heart. But this time in a much clearer form. I regretted not having brought my CAD with me. I wasn't good at holding back without a tool to assist me. If I badly hurt people like them, I'd be in trouble in a few different ways.

But if only I had my CAD, these jerks wouldn't babble on however they wanted!

Without actually knowing what I was getting so passionate about, I turned a sharp glare on the big man standing in my brother's way.

The man looked at me and narrowed his eyes coolly.

His lips moved.

I wouldn't learn whether it was to smile or to talk.

"I'm not looking for an apology, so turn around and walk away. For all our

sakes.”

His tone was rather calm for a young man, and his words were completely unexpected from a child. The big man’s face hardened.

“...What was that?”

A low, rumbling, whispered question.

“I believe you heard me.”

An impassive retort, almost a monologue.

A dangerous light came into the man’s eyes. “Rub your head against the ground and beg our forgiveness. If you do, we’ll let you off with a few bruises.”

“You touch your forehead to the ground when you grovel, not your whole head.”

A moment later:

Without any signal or warning, the man threw a punch at my brother.

Despite having a large frame compared to others his age, my brother was still in his first year of middle school. They were like a giant and a dwarf.

I shut my eyes.

There came a *psh*.

I finally realized that if he punched my brother, I’d be hit, too, since I was right behind him—so I was mystified when that didn’t happen.

I nervously opened my eyes.

The first thing I saw was a frozen expression of disbelief on the big man’s face. I didn’t need to worry about what was making him do that. His right arm was half-extended.

He had stopped the oncoming fist in his hands.

It was two hands against one, but that shouldn’t have made a difference considering their weight classes.

The attacker must have been at least twice that boy’s weight. And yet, my brother had stayed firmly in place, not turning aside the man’s punch but

stopping it outright.

Did he use magic? ...No, there was no sign of it.

Leaving aside academic ability, physical strength, and movement ability, I was better than my brother when it came to magic. I couldn't have missed him using it.

"Now, that's something... I was just fooling around before, but now..."

The big man smirked, drew in his arm, and put his fists in front of his chest.

Boxing?

Karate?

I was a complete amateur about combat sports and martial arts, so I couldn't tell the difference. But I did glean that the man, mostly joking before, was now serious.

The thought of escape slipping from my mind, I watched the big man from behind my brother's shoulder. As I held my breath in silence, I heard something from him I never thought I'd hear:

"You sure about this? Any more and you might get hurt."

Why was he provoking them?! He would never win in a normal fight. He should be running away.

No, it didn't matter what he was thinking. I should be running away—by myself, if I had to.

...But despite thinking as much, my body wouldn't leave its space behind him.

"For a runt, you can sure talk the talk!"

My eyes couldn't follow what happened after that.

All I saw was the result; I could only guess what took place before it.

The man had stepped forward with his left foot.

So had my brother, his foot thrust between the man's two.

The adult's right hand was drawn back near his shoulder, as if he was about to throw his punch.

Then my brother's left fist was in the middle of the man's chest.

The slight gap in the man's defenses wasn't because he was about to throw a punch—his attack must have bounced back like that.

The drumlike pounding noise had probably been my brother's fist. When he pulled his front foot back, the man, as if they'd arranged it this way, sank to his knees on the road with a painful-sounding *crack*.

My brother looked down at the fallen attacker as he coughed in pain, then slowly moved his gaze to the two in back.

They stood there, motionless.

My brother turned his back to them.

"Let's go back."

He put a hand on my arm.

It was only then that I realized he'd been talking to me.

"Miyuki, has something happened?"

When we came back from my interrupted walk, Miss Sakurai's face paled and she hurried over to us at a trot. I didn't think my face was that bad, but I knew it was a little white, so I gave up right away on trying to deceive her.

"Just...um, there was a man, and..."

"My...!"

That seemed to be all Miss Sakurai needed to figure most of it out. She casually looked me up and down, probably checking to see if my clothing was disheveled.



“Everything’s okay.”

I had to force it, but I attempted a smile. When Miss Sakurai saw it, she smiled back at me in relief.

But my forced smile didn’t last long.

...Because my brother saved me.

Those words never made it out of my mouth.

I glanced at him, meaning to say it, but he was feigning ignorance, his face as impassive as always. He bowed lightly to Miss Sakurai, and then, never even sparing a glance in my direction, he retreated into a room.

The smile I’d struggled to make was on the verge of breaking down.

“...I’m going to take a shower to wash off my sweat.”

I wasn’t sweating very much, but with that as my excuse, I fled into the shower room.

The hot shower water sprang off my skin.

I didn’t even bother to get the sunscreen off. I only felt the water’s heat, trying to warm my body, which seemed about to start shivering.

“Why...?”

I put my head under the stream. The hot water ran down my face, mixing with other drops when they got to the corners of my eyes.

“Why am I crying...?”

A confused voice came to my ears. Not a crying voice—almost like a complete stranger’s.

“Why do I have to be crying?” I shouted hysterically but got no answer. I was the only one here.

“Why...? Just why...?”

All I could hear was the shower. Nobody would answer my question for me.



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

“Oh,” muttered Tatsuya as he was looking out the window to the courtyard.

It pulled Miyuki’s mind back to the present. “Tatsuya?”

“It’s the Kuroba siblings.” He answered her unvoiced question, his expression betraying a hint of surprise.

“Ayako and Fumiya?”

Tatsuya may have only shown slight surprise, but Miyuki was different. In a fluster, she started to rise, paused halfway up, changed her mind, and sat back down.

“It looks like they’re just returning.”

The Kuroba siblings had just exited a detached building where their grandmother lived. The younger sister of Tatsuya and Miyuki’s late grandfather, she was aunt to the current family head, Maya. Fumiya Kuroba was the number two candidate to take over the Yotsuba. It wasn’t strange to see them come to their grandmother’s dwelling to see how she was doing. Miyuki didn’t seem surprised at the fact that they’d come here, either—her surprise was because of something else.

“...Could it be a coincidence?” she asked.

“It wouldn’t be like them to know we were here and not say hello.”

Miyuki thought he was right.

“I can’t tell if fate ties us strongly or not. We always seem to barely miss one another.”

They never actually bumped into one another, but they never entirely missed one another, either. Miyuki, thinking the same thing as her brother, reflected on what had happened on the only night they had ever interacted...



August 4, AD 2092
Okinawa
Beach House—Hotel Party Venue

Being on vacation didn't mean we could completely sever ourselves from the bonds of societal expectation. I'd only just entered middle school, but even in my life, some people were still too important to refuse an invitation from.

The one fortunate thing was that they were all matters related to our family, and there weren't very many...but it took me completely by surprise to find out that those few people had come to the same place at the same time as us.

Mother's cousin, Mitsugu Kuroba, had sent the invitation.

The hands on the clock pointed to six PM. We would have to leave the beach house soon.

I sat in front of my dresser and picked up a brush. "Haah..." A sigh leaked from my mouth. My expression in the mirror was one of dull boredom.

The parties themselves I was comfortable enough with. But we'd only arrived in Okinawa from Tokyo this very day. I would have at least liked to relax for tonight.

"Miyuki, have you finished getting ready?"

A knock and a voice from the other side of the door. I'd been dallying in my room, and Miss Sakurai had come to get me.

"Oh! Yes, I have," I responded, reflexively standing up. If she knew what I'd been thinking, I'd certainly have been in for a scolding.

She interpreted my answer as permission to enter, so she opened the door. I did, in fact, mean it that way, so I wasn't flustered or anything.

"Oh. You're already looking put together, aren't you?" she said, letting a wry smile slip when she saw me. I'd changed into a cocktail dress, put on a hair clip and necklace, and was holding my handbag. "Your wonderful clothing won't mean very much if you look so sullen."

Was my face that easy to read? "You could tell?"

Miss Sakurai and I were close, but it was still someone else's pair of eyes on me. I'd been taking care to keep my displeasure to myself, too.

"Well, *I* can," she said, winking somewhat meaningfully at me... Did that mean others wouldn't have been able to read me?

"Come on... Please don't tease me," I said, puffing out a cheek in anger without thinking. I hastily did my best to smooth it over with a more ladylike face.

Miss Sakurai let out a giggle, and I felt my face grow hot. I was already in middle school. I thought I would have stopped acting so childish by now.

"I'm sorry..." she said, continuing to giggle for a short while. Her face didn't look thirty at all—she barely looked older than twenty. Then her expression suddenly changed.

I felt my own feelings tighten, too.

"But plenty of people have sharper eyes than me," she said. "I know you well enough to understand you don't want to do this. But there might be people at the party who can read your expressions at a glance. You're not an ordinary middle school student, after all, so I think you should try not to show any vulnerability."

Her advice hit the bull's-eye. I didn't even feel like trying to argue. "What should I do?"

"Well, no matter how well you think you're hiding it, your emotions will still show up in your eyes and at the edges of your face."

...Did that mean I couldn't do anything about it?

“What you need, I suppose, is to learn to deceive your own emotions,” she continued, her voice soothing and carefully instructive, probably picking up on my dissatisfaction. “The first person your mask needs to convince is yourself.”



Nevertheless, I was too much of a child to mask my own feelings from others. The closer we got to the party venue, the more my mood soured against my will.

Uncle Mitsugu wasn't a bad person. (Though, technically, he wasn't my uncle.) I didn't know if it was because his wife had passed away at a young age, but the way he fawned over his children was a little—no, *quite* annoying.

I swear. Why does he always brag about his own children to another child? Well, I'm sure he's not thinking about how I feel. I just wish he'd keep that stuff between adults.

I let a sigh fall from my mouth—an intentional one, actually. If I didn't get the sighs out while I could, I wasn't sure I'd be able to endure the actual party.

We were already on the hotel grounds. From here, we could see the uselessly extravagant—from my point of view anyway—entrance.

Our self-driving commuter vehicle came to a stop. My brother stepped out, motions crisp, before holding open the door, waiting for me to get out. I hardened my expression, then set foot onto a boring battlefield of melancholy.

My hard-faced uncle and my older male cousins were in the lobby, as well as my dignified-looking older female cousins. They were all trying not to stand out, but I'd known these people ever since I was born, so it would take more than that to deceive my eyes. Their behavior had nothing to do with me, but it made me want to tell them they needed more practice.

Of course, in the same way, my brother wasn't the only one I'd brought tonight, either. A nationwide security company had temporarily issued a pair of female bodyguards for me. There were many places, like parties, where men wouldn't be able to accompany me, and it was nighttime, as well. Miss Sakurai was usually with me, but she was at Mother's side right now.

Mother had a somewhat frail constitution, so she was still resting at the

beach house. There was nothing I could do about that, but it meant I'd have to talk with Uncle Mitsugu by myself.

This was depressing.

If I couldn't rely on my own father to begin with, my older brother should have been the one in these conversations—not me, the younger sister. I glared bitterly at his back as he walked ahead of me.

"Thank you very much for inviting us, Uncle Mitsugu."

In the predictably enormous party hall with predictably extravagant tables in front of us, my uncle, dressed in an expensive suit, predictably came to welcome me. I gave him the archetypal greeting. There was no point in seeking originality in matters such as these.

"I'm so glad you came, Miyu," my uncle replied in an excessively friendly manner. "How is your mother doing?"

Uncle Mitsugu was the only person who still called me Miyu, my childhood nickname. And he refused to comment on my brother, also like always. Of course, all he was doing was standing behind me silently. They were both at fault.

"Thank you for your consideration," I replied. "I believe she is just a little tired, so she decided to play it safe for today."

"Well, that's a relief," he said. "Whoops, let's not stand around here. Let's go in. Ayako and Fumiya have been dying to see you again, Miyu."

So, they're here, I thought. Of course they would be. Despite having warned myself so much beforehand, I came dangerously close to heaving a sigh.

My uncle led me to one of the tables near the back. My brother remained at the entrance. Waiting by the wall was customary bodyguard behavior. It got on my nerves more than it should have to see others treat him on the same level as a servant, even though I did the same thing—probably because I was selfish.

That aside, I was now stranded without any support, forced to talk to the Kuroba family.

"Ayako, Fumiya, how have you been?" I asked.

They both smiled in their usual way, Fumiya happily and Ayako as though she'd been waiting for the question.

"Miyuki! It's been so long."

"I'm glad to see you haven't changed, either, Miyuki."

Ayako and Fumiya were both one school year below me—sixth graders in elementary school. Unlike my brother and I, they were actually twins. However, since I was born in March, and the two of them in June, we were the same age.

I wasn't sure if that was why Ayako had always felt a sense of rivalry toward me... Another reason I found it annoying being around them. Fumiya was their succession candidate, not her. I honestly didn't understand what she stood to gain from acting so competitive.

Fumiya was cute, since he didn't hide the fact that he loved me. Maybe it was a little too cute for a boy. Compared to my brother, he was just so... No, I suppose my brother was the exception.

Their clothes today were, once again, far too cute. I had to struggle to keep my facial muscles in check.

Fumiya, I know they have the air-conditioning on, but it's still summer. Aren't you hot in that? His outfit was a mess jacket plus a cummerbund, albeit casually arranged... This was a private party, so it still seemed like it was going too far.

Ayako, on the other hand... Well, she looked the same as always, I supposed. A dress garnished with ribbons, frills, and decorative buttons aplenty; socks that reached above her knees; and slip-ons also accented with ribbons. A headband lined with frills sat atop her neatly curled hair. I wasn't going to complain about someone else's hobbies, but the getup didn't seem fitting for a summer resort.

They were both happy to wear them (and their father happy to let them), so none of that was any of my business.

As I was trying to escape reality by thinking about their clothing, Uncle kept on bragging. I waited for time to pass, nodding along to stories I didn't care about—Ayako winning a piano recital, Fumiya's equestrian teacher praising him, things of that nature. I always started to wonder what I'd done to deserve this, but fortunately, I never had to endure it for very long. And Fumiya, as

usual, began to fidget.

“By the way, Miyuki...where might Tatsuya be?”

Told you. Fumiya was a really good kid and loved me as though I were his real sister, just like Ayako. But he loved my brother even more—in fact, some might say he revered him. Or maybe *adored* was the proper word. Of course, I understood his feelings to an extent.

In a general sense—at least, insofar as the judgment baselines set by the Magic Association went—my brother hadn’t been blessed with magical talent. However, he had the brains, the physique, and a special ability to make up for all that and more. His grades in school were far and away the best. No matter the sport, he was always one of the most skilled, if not the best by a mile. And he had a trump card all his own—one that could be the bane of all magicians.

My brother was probably a lot like the fictional heroes that boys looked up to. Actually, I was sure it wasn’t only boys, either. His outward kindness, his calmness, and his gentle features weren’t important to me, but he was really cool, and...

...Wait, what the heck am I thinking?! He’s nothing more than my bodyguard. We just happen to be siblings. Why, that almost sounds like a brother complex or something!

“He’s waiting over there,” I said, pointing toward the wall and putting a lot of effort into smiling, lest they catch on to the dark clouds rushing into my mind.

“Oh,” said Fumiya, blushing. It looked like I’d fooled him.

“...Um, which direction again?”

As Fumiya’s eyes wandered, partly to evade my own and partly to look for my brother, Ayako glanced about the walls as well, feigning indifference. It was funny to me how easy her attitude was to read, and my lips accidentally turned up. She seemed to think I was smiling at her brother, though. As she kept up her disinterested charade, I pointed out where my brother was standing to Fumiya.

He was looking this way.

“Tatsuya!” Fumiya’s face sparkled, and he trotted over to my brother.

“You’re impossible sometimes,” complained Ayako, nevertheless quickly following on his heels. She looked like she was taking great care not to break out into a run.

My uncle watched all this with a sour face like he always did. He started after Ayako—slowly, unlike his children—and I followed him.

Fumiya began frantically telling my brother about something. He nodded a few times, and then the corners of his lips turned up a little, and his teeth peeked out, and...was that a smile?

My brother?

Not a smirk or a dry grin—a normal smile?

But why...?

He’s never smiled like that at me before...!

“Come on, you two,” said Uncle Mitsugu. “It’s rude to get in the way of Tatsuya’s job.”

While I had to dig my nails into my palms to keep the polite smile on my face, my uncle had on a perfectly natural grin. I couldn’t see his true feelings in it at all.

“It looks like you’re doing your duty quite well,” he continued to Tatsuya.

“Thank you, sir,” said my brother, turning to our uncle. He had returned to how he usually looked. His expression from a moment ago had vanished into a mask of impassivity.

“Oh, but, Father, a short while must be fine,” insisted Ayako. “We invited Miyuki to be our guest today, and it’s the host’s job to ensure the safety of our guests. I don’t think Tatsuya will have anything to do as long as he’s here.”

“Ayako’s right,” piped in Fumiya. “The Kuroba guards are certainly good enough to make sure one person gets kept safe. Right, Dad?”

Oh? Fumiya doesn’t call him Father anymore... It didn’t matter, but it made me wonder—and thanks to that, I could push the rest of my emotions out of the picture.

My thoughts aside, Uncle Mitsugu fumbled for words. “You’re right, but...” he started, face troubled. I knew how he really felt, and Ayako and Fumiya probably did, too. He didn’t appreciate how friendly his children were with my brother, especially Fumiya.

Fumiya was a candidate to be the next leader of the Yotsuba. My brother was a mere escort of mine, and I was a candidate as well. His special title of Guardian meant that he was truly just a servant—and, at worst, no more than a disposable tool. You couldn’t inherit the Yotsuba without being able to think of them that way.

Of course, for tonight he was my escort, and he and Fumiya were merely cousins. There really wasn’t any problem with Fumiya liking him. The same went for Ayako. If she liked my brother, no matter what kind of friendliness she showed him, there was no particular issue. Aunt Maya probably wouldn’t care about something like that.

To be perfectly harsh, Uncle Mitsugu cared only about outward appearances. He didn’t see my brother as any more than a servant, a tool to use and throw away as needed. In that sense, Uncle was a Yotsuba through and through. He must have deemed it unsightly for his own children to have any feelings for a tool.

That was the natural way of our family. And in order for me to become Miyuki Yotsuba, I would have to keep the same attitude. He was my Guardian before he was my brother. A bodyguard. A shield who, if it came to it, would throw away his life to protect mine.

It was only right I should have no love for a tool, and it also wasn’t his place to show me any affection.

That was what I told myself. I repeated it over and over, like a mantra.

My brother was a bodyguard.

A shield to protect me.

That was the duty given to him. I had to follow in the footsteps of Aunt Maya. Tatsuya wasn’t my brother but rather—

Suddenly, I felt a pinprick deep within my mind. I was pretty sure that I lost

track of where I was for a moment. That was just an illusion, of course. I'd been invited to Uncle Mitsugu's party, and there he was, making a difficult face.

...Was I thinking about something important...? No, it's probably just my imagination.

"...Fumiya, you shouldn't worry your father so much."

Surprisingly, my brother was the one who helped Uncle Mitsugu. He called Fumiya by name. He said it filled with affection, as if he was his own brother.

I felt a slight throbbing in the back of my head. I wanted to scowl in discomfort. But I couldn't. If I showed any displeasure right now, Uncle Mitsugu might misunderstand it as dissatisfaction with his treatment of my brother.

...But would it be a misunderstanding...?

No, stop, I can't think about that! Um, what was the best thing to do at times like these again?

Miss Sakurai had taught me something just before I left. Yes—I needed to be able to fool my own emotions...

"Mr. Kuroba, may I leave the venue in your hands?" my brother requested. "I'd like to go and look around for a bit."

"Oh, you do?" replied our uncle, making an exaggerated show of surprise, then purposely praised him. "What an admirable attitude," he said. "All right. You can leave Miyuki to us. I'll take responsibility here for a while."



I knew he could give as much fake praise as he needed to. He'd been wanting to get rid of a certain person, and they just gave him a good excuse to do it.

A truly convenient mask.

The first person your mask needs to convince is yourself.

...My brother was faithfully trying to carry out the role assigned to him.

"But we're going back to Shizuoka tomorrow!" complained Fumiya. "We barely ever get to see him, and now we can't even talk to him for very long?"

"Fumiya, please calm down..." said Ayako. "Tatsuya, he's right about that—so please come back soon, okay?"

"All right," replied my brother. "I'll go around once and then return. Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Kuroba."

...I, too, needed to do my best to carry out the role assigned to me.

That was what I told myself as I listened to Fumiya's objection, Ayako's request, and my brother's kind reply.



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

“...Hee-hee...”

When Miyuki suddenly let out a giggle, Tatsuya, who’d been looking out the window, returned his attention inside.

It was a large Western-style room, which stood out in the building’s more Eastern construction. The vivid colors and landscapes on the walls were neither screens nor reproductions but genuine oil paintings on canvas by a prominent modern artist. The table, stately and made of natural wood, was big enough to seat more than ten.

But the room still felt empty. One reason was likely that the only seating at the table were four sofas instead of ten chairs; another was the lack of other furnishings besides those things in the room, which made for a lot of empty space. Maybe it was to impart a psychological oppressiveness by making the room appear larger than it actually was.

Of course, Tatsuya wasn’t paying attention to the psychological effects at this point. His gaze went straight to his sister.

When he looked at her dubiously, Miyuki, sitting on a cabriole-legged sofa, drew back awkwardly. “I’m sorry, Tatsuya. I was remembering something from long ago,” she said, smiling.

“Was it something fun?” he asked, smiling along with her.

“No... I was laughing at how very foolish I used to be.”

The thought was self-deprecating enough for Tatsuya's smile to disappear and for him to blink at her. Still, contrary to what she'd suggested, he could hear nothing negative in her voice nor see anything dark in her expression.

"Come to think of it, you've always been very kind to Ayako and Fumiya, haven't you?" she said. "That was a big shock to me, you know."

Tatsuya grinned drily. He'd figured out what she was recalling. "Well, yes... But don't be so hard on me. I was a kid at the time, too."

"Oh, I would never," she replied. "I was the foolish one, without a doubt."

From the rest of the world's perspective, the siblings were both still young enough to call children. They didn't seem to think of themselves as adults, either. Still, neither of them felt anything wrong with calling themselves more childish three years ago than they were now.

"I am your sister, and yet I didn't understand a thing about you. No... I wasn't even trying to."

Tatsuya considered objecting, but his sister smiled ephemerally and shook her head, causing him to be unable to speak. It was neither something he was supposed to nor needed to object to. Both of them knew that neither of them was to blame for back then.

If she didn't want to continue her story of the past, then Tatsuya wouldn't bring it up again. He returned his gaze toward the window.

Though he looked like he was spacing out, his five senses were completely engaged, leaving no detail unnoticed. His super-sense, which exceeded his five senses, was always standing by, ready to access the Idea at any time.

All to protect Miyuki. All to eliminate anyone who might cause Miyuki harm. That was how it was now, and it had been the same then.

Back then, she simply hadn't realized it yet.

Back then, he always kept her from realizing it.



August 5, AD 2092

Okinawa

Beach House—Onna Shoreline

The night's events carried on until a fairly late hour. It ending up being quite the day, having gone to the party once we arrived in Okinawa and then not climbing into bed until almost midnight on top of it.

Nevertheless, I woke up before the sun had completely risen the next morning. I could only ascribe that to habit.

The truth was, I wanted to sleep longer, but I also didn't want to become a lazy woman. So turning over and going back to sleep was out of the question. I roused myself out of bed and opened the curtains, then decided to open the windows as well to let the fresh air in. The room was on the second floor facing the backyard, so I didn't have to worry about anyone seeing me in my pajamas—but in truth, it *was* good custom for a lady to first groom her appearance upon waking up.

I breathed in a big gulp of the salty breeze and gave a big stretch. Then I happened to look down, and I saw my brother doing his training.

He lowered his stance, stepped forward with his right foot, and then thrust out with his right hand, then left. Keeping his posture low, he took a step with his left foot, then extended his left hand even farther—only to swiftly pull it back a moment later and exchange it with a right punch.

He turned his body, drawing his right foot up to his left, opening his right hand from inside to outside, then his left from outside to inside. Then he moved

his right hand up and his left hand down, all in powerful fashion.

It was probably some karate or *kenpo* form I didn't know.

He took small two-pound weights in his hands, then continued through each movement, crisply and cleanly. They were fresh, vivid motions, like the trademark poses first-rate stage actors or even dancers often assumed.

After traveling in a circle around half the backyard, he stopped moving, relaxed, and fully exhaled.

Huh? Done already...?

I regretfully watched my brother's back as he took deep breaths—wondering if he would show me that beautiful dance again.

Show me more.

Just one more time is enough.

Show your sister how cool you can look—

Wait! I thought in shock. *Oh no—I was fascinated for a second there, wasn't I?*

I hurriedly closed the curtains and stepped away from the window. The curtain rail made a pretty loud noise, but he couldn't have heard it from the yard...I thought. I rested my back against the wall, then slid down to the floor.

My face went hot. My heart was thumping at a fast, extreme beat. I put a hand to my chest, but I still couldn't calm down completely.

He didn't see me, right?

He hadn't looked up once. He couldn't have been watching me as I stood at the window.

And yet, I couldn't help feeling like he *had* noticed me there, staring at him, enamored.



Miss Sakurai prepared our breakfast that morning as usual. The beach house was administered by a HAR, so it had an automatic cooker, but Miss Sakurai, of all people, felt that machine-prepared meals didn't have any flavor. As long as she didn't have anything else in particular to do, she made all the family's food

by hand.

I'd been trying to help her out lately, but even I knew that, frankly, my skills had a long way to go.

"Have you decided on your plans for the day, my lady?" asked Miss Sakurai as I was having my tea. On the surface, she was talking to Mother, but she was referring to me as well, and that was something I didn't need to ask her to find out.

Mother pretended to think for a moment, then answered, "It's cooled off a bit, so I'd like to go out on the water."

"Then, shall I prepare a cruiser?"

"Hmm... A sailing yacht would be good. One that isn't too large."

"Understood, my lady. Does a four o'clock departure suit you?"

"Yes, thank you."

Mother often left out the concrete details, but Miss Sakurai was used to that. She picked up on what she meant and smoothly put a schedule together.

That would mean my own plans for four and later were decided. Mother probably meant to spend her time here in the beach house until then, but what might I do?

"Miyuki, if you have no other plans, why not go to the beach?" offered Miss Sakurai as I sat there in thought. "I believe it will be refreshing, even if you only take a nap there."

"...All right," I replied. "I'll spend the morning relaxing on the beach."

"I'll help you get ready." She giggled. "If you're going to wear a swimsuit, you'll need to make sure you have sunscreen on everywhere."

Huh? Why the giggle? "No, I'm fine. I can do it myself."

"Now, now, you needn't be so reserved."

Why does she seem oddly entertained with something?

"The southern sunlight is intense, after all. You'll get a bad burn if you miss a spot."

Miss Sakurai, your eyes look strangely suspicious.

“You’ll have to put it on everywhere, even under your swimsuit.” She giggled some more.

“Umm, Miss Sakurai?” You’re kind of scaring me!

“Now then, let’s go get ready.”

Without another word, I tried to escape, but before I even made it one step, my mother’s Guardian had me by the wrist. Her grip wasn’t painfully strong, but I just couldn’t seem to shake it off.

As she dragged me up to the second floor, I was pretty sure I saw my brother turn away, suppressing a laugh.

...But he would never have such a human reaction.



After Miss Sakurai personally finished applying suntan lotion to literally everywhere on my body, I spurred my exhausted self on and went to the beach closest to the house.

...Why did I have to get so tired over something like that? It just wasn’t fair.

Anyway, I ached to sit down and relax. I took off my open-front tunic, then lay facedown on a towel my brother had placed under the umbrella he’d stood in the sand.

My swimsuit wasn’t quite a bikini, but it was still a two-piece that showed a lot of skin. I hadn’t decided on this one—Miss Sakurai had made me wear it.

Even seeing me in such an unbecoming position—though it was odd to say as much myself—my brother didn’t bat an eye. He sat down next to me, wearing knee-length swim trunks and a parka, then stared out at the horizon. He looked spaced-out, with his knees slightly up and hands around them. He didn’t seem to notice as I stole a glance or two at him from the side—he just quietly watched the water.

Could he have been bored?

A first-year middle school student, healthy and physically fit, just sitting here with the sea in front of him.

I sat up, starting to wonder if that was normal, and furtively looked at the other umbrellas.

Over there...a family. A dad and a mom and a girl about six or seven. A moment later, a boy, a little older than the girl, came running over to them from the water's edge. He tugged on the father's hand, trying to bring him into the surf.

The umbrella next to them had nobody under it. Things for about two people were there. Two parkas—that meant two people, right? They were probably both in the water.

Past that was... *Eep!* I looked away in a fluster. Then I glanced back, before looking away in a fluster for a second time.

There was a teenage boy, about high school aged—I didn't think he was in college—putting oil on a similarly aged young woman's body. Even on fairly risqué spots. Wait, he was completely feeling her up, wasn't he? Weren't they embarrassed? There was nothing blocking others from seeing them!

The guy, at least, didn't seem bothered at all by anyone watching. He was grinning as he ran his hands over her body. It was kind of a creepy smile to look at.

Did all boys like that sort of thing?

You might laugh and call me inexperienced—Miss Sakurai, for example, would certainly find it funny—but I read in some magazine once that boys all wanted to touch girls' bodies. I've heard my friends at school talking about how every time one of our older classmates went on dates with her boyfriend, he wanted her body, and it was troubling her—but according to them, she'd gotten somewhere. At the time, I was indignant. What did he think girls were? That evil free sex culture ended over fifty years ago! And it was a middle school student we were talking about here!

...Oops, I need to calm down. I can't let any frost start forming on this midsummer Okinawan beach.

Still, it didn't look like the girl hated it, either. I couldn't see her face, since she was lying facedown like I was. But she was letting the boy do what he wanted,

so she must have been okay with it.

...Like I was?

Lying facedown, with him sitting next to me...

Did he think about those things at all? Did he have feelings like that? I twisted my neck and stole another glance at his face.

He was looking at me. Our eyes met.

I froze, unable to avert mine, but he looked away after a few seconds, turning back to face the horizon again.

After I managed to regain control of myself, I couldn't even yell at him. My face burned, and I hid it with my arm. I considered undoing my mostly tied-up hair and using it as a curtain, but I could foresee that causing problems later.

The only thing I could do was wait, facedown, for the heat to recede from my cheeks. When I closed off my vision, my mind started thinking unnecessary things, now that it was boiled to a nice temperature.

Since when had he been looking at me?

And what had he been looking at?

My back? My legs? Or...?

Was he interested in those things, too? Did he, well, feel like he wanted to touch my body...?

I knew this wasn't something I needed to think about, since we were related.

Still, my brother and I... Even though we lived in the same house, we didn't see each other around very often. The only time we spent together was when we went to and from school. We were with each other all day only on vacations like these.

I didn't have any memories of when we were really little, like of us taking baths together or even of him playing with me. To me, he was less of a family member and more of a boy I knew, about a year older than me. That was how it felt.



My brother probably felt the same. To him, I must have been just a girl a year younger, in the same grade as him...

Suddenly, I heard the sand crackle. I could tell my brother had gotten up. But I couldn't see. The arm I was using as a pillow squeezed onto my face. I could feel my hands, my legs, my back—my whole body tense. The only thing still moving in my body was my heart, trying to beat its way out of my chest.

I thought I felt my brother leaning over me.

I couldn't breathe. My mind was in a haze. A pointlessly calm thought crossed my mind—that it was too soon to be oxygen deprived. Yet there I was, unable to give any meaningful commands to my limbs.

And then a thin cloth floated over me.

...Huh?

I felt the fabric cover me from shoulder to thigh. It was the tunic I'd taken off. That tunic, which I'd haphazardly folded up, was now spread out on top of me.

For some reason, I felt a sudden sense of relief. My inconsequential tension evaporated, and maybe my mind relaxed as a result.

At the time, I didn't have the energy for self-analysis, though. I let my drowsiness pull me into a comfortable doze.

As it turned out, I would need to thank Miss Sakurai. Despite being under the parasol, the sunlight was hot and bright, and I'd slept for quite a while. If she hadn't put sunscreen everywhere, even under my fingernails, my exposed parts would have been in a terrible state for sure.

"It's hot..."

When I stopped making up for my sleep deprivation in the extreme heat, I saw my brother still next to me, gazing at the horizon.

"...How long was I asleep?" I asked.

"About two hours."

I hadn't given him any warning I was about to ask a question. But he answered me without skipping a beat—almost as though there wasn't any

other question I would ask. It almost seemed like he'd replied hastily in order to not give me time to think about it.

"Oh."

Something about it bugged me, but I'd just woken up, and my brain couldn't think too hard about the vague sense of wrongness. I picked myself up, my tunic sliding down onto the sheet. The sea wind must have blown sand onto me; even though I'd been resting on a sheet, my arms and legs were speckled with brown.

"I'm going into the water," I said curtly, not waiting for an answer before pulling my sandals on.

A whole lot of footprints were around our sheet, dug into the sand. They weren't there before I went to sleep. The flatter ones here and there looked like people had fallen on their backs.

Had people been playing beach ball...?

All the parasols around us had been taken out.

I must have really been out cold, I thought, heading for the water's edge without a care in the world.



After a late lunch, I spent a little while reading in my room. But after two hours, I grew bored. I didn't hate reading; I just wasn't in the mood for it today.

I'll ask Mother if I can watch her practice magic, I thought, heading to her room.

My room was the one farthest back on the second floor. Mother's was on the opposite side of the stairs, the farthest one in that direction. One empty room came after mine, and my brother's was next to the stairs. When I passed it, I heard voices from inside.

I stopped in spite of myself. This beach residence was an awfully normal resort, so it didn't have perfect soundproofing installed like our house. But the construction was still good enough that I shouldn't have been able to hear a normal conversation from out in the hallway. They had to be talking loudly, or

the sound wouldn't have made it past the door.

And wait—was that voice Miss Sakurai's? Without thinking, I pressed an ear to the door.

"How could you leave such a nasty bruise without tending to it?!"

Miss Sakurai was probably scolding my brother.

"It isn't severe. It didn't break any bones."

"Whether or not you broke a bone doesn't matter! Doesn't it hurt?!"

"It hurts. But it's my penalty for making a mistake."

Injury? A penalty? What on earth were they talking about?

"I swear, every single time... I've already given up on fixing how you think about things, but... Anyway, I'll cast healing magic on it, so please take off your clothes."

Every time?

"There's no need for that. If it looks like it'll cause a problem in battle, it'll heal itself."

"...Tatsuya, even Guardians have daily lives to think about. We're not fighting machines. To begin with, you could have woken Miyuki up and run away beforehand. We try to respect the will and freedom of those we guard as much as we can, but that doesn't mean you have to get other people involved in fights just because you didn't want to wake her up from her nap."

...Huh? Me?

"I'm sorry."

"You had better think about this, all right? Fleeing is a perfectly valid strategy. Next time, consider trying to be a little more flexible."

I couldn't hear her sigh, but I was pretty sure she heaved one, then turned around. Panicked but quiet, I snuck away back to my own room.



The cruiser Miss Sakurai procured was an electric sailing boat that seated six. With the four of us plus the navigator and his assistant, we had a full

complement.

We sat down on the long, boarded benches facing one another and waited to pull away. Mother was straight across from me, and my brother was next to me.

As I pretended to study how they unfurled the sail, I glanced at my brother's profile. He was staring earnestly at the process, not noticing my eyes on him.

The conversation I'd accidentally overheard earlier had been on my mind ever since. My brother was my bodyguard; it was a natural possibility that he would get hurt to protect me.

The thing was, I didn't remember my brother getting hurt much at all in the past. I'd almost never seen any direct trouble like yesterday, either. His injuries always came from training.

Because of that, I figured that even though I was a succession candidate for the Yotsuba, most people wouldn't be cowardly enough to lay their hands on a child like me. That only happened in novels; in real life, it was an exceptional occurrence. For my cousin Fumiya, the danger was less about the clan's circumstances and more about Uncle Mitsugu's job.

The Guardian assigned to me was a mere symbol that came with my position as Yotsuba succession candidate. That was why they passed on the role of Guardian to a child like my brother—that was how they had provided him with a place in the family, since he was terrible at magic. That was how I thought of it, though it also seemed like that was the excuse I gave to try to ignore my guilty conscience.

But from the way they talked about his role, it was as though he got hurt on a daily basis.

"Miyuki, is there something on your mind?" said a voice suddenly, across from me.

Flustered, I returned my gaze to the voice. "Huh? Oh no, it's nothing." This wasn't good. Now Mother was worried about me. "It's just a long time since I've gone sailing..."

"Oh yes, you're right."

Pretending to follow the sail-raising process seemed to have been fortunate. But I knew I couldn't fool her forever, so I decided to leave the thinking for later.

With good timing, they signaled that we were about to set off. Then, despite not using the motor, we left the jetty at a faster speed than I thought we would. I focused my mind on the receding scenery.

Buffeted by a westerly wind, the cruiser took a course north-northwest, in the direction of Iejima.

I had thought the summer wind in Okinawa blew southeast, so I asked the captain. He said a low-pressure system was approaching from the east. It wasn't strong enough to grow into a typhoon, so he told me not to worry about it.

I hadn't been that concerned, so that actually made me worry more...but it wasn't like we'd been sailing for days, so I probably didn't have any reason to fear it.

We were going in the direction of Iejima, but the point of our trip was a leisure cruise, so we were planning on turning around partway there. With the current wind speed, the sun would set before we even got to the island.

Our excursion turned out to be much more pleasant than I thought it would be. The wind swept away all the murky feelings inside me, blowing them far away. If I'd known it would feel so good, I would have asked to leave earlier and go farther out. I closed my eyes, and for a while, I felt the wind on my skin as it blew past the sail. If it had ended like this, I would have slept very well that night.

If being the operative word. I soon realized it wasn't going to end like that.

Tension pricked my skin. I opened my eyes.

Miss Sakurai was gazing—no, glaring out at the open sea, her expression severe.

The captain's assistant looked frantic as he called over the radio saying something about—a submarine? By the way he looked, it must not have been the JDF's. Could it have come from another country? These were Japan's waters—was this an invasion?!

I wasn't the only one starting to panic. The very boat seemed disturbed as its motor started groaning. The crew began to unfurl the sail. Then, as the cruiser swung around, it tilted. I grabbed the long bench's banister.

"My lady, to the front."

I knew this wasn't the time, but it came as something of a shock to hear my brother address me as "my lady." That's what he always did, but the title was reserved and formal, and it felt sad.

Because of that, my response was even more harsh than normal: "I know that!"

My brother obeyed my completely uncalled-for aggression and gave up his seat.

Then I spied bubbles rising to the water's surface. My brother was guarding from in front of me, so I couldn't see his face, but I very clearly knew what his eyes looked like.

It was neither a glare nor a stare. It was that empty look, with no emotion to be seen in his eyes.

Miss Sakurai guarded Mother in the same way; they were standing at the quarter. Mother was a very powerful magician, but lately her body hadn't been able to keep up very well with her magical output. The relationship between magic and the body wasn't well understood yet, but observations showed a depletion of stamina corresponding to the output of powerful spells when they were used.

I couldn't let Mother use magic. When I realized that, I quickly got my CAD out of my pouch. Miss Sakurai already had hers on standby. And my brother—he just stood there, empty-handed.

Then I saw two black shadows rise with the seething bubbles, heading this way. *Dolphins? No, of course not!* I instinctively knew what they were. *Torpedoes? Without any warning?!*

As I froze, my brother did something I didn't understand. He reached out with his right hand toward the black shadows approaching on the water.

What point would that have? He doesn't even have a CAD!

And I'm a magician, too, aren't I?!

I cursed myself, mostly to vent my anger. My lack of ability to assist was irritating, but so was my brother's strange behavior.

I looked up at the side of Miss Sakurai's face, wanting to depend on her. As Mother's Guardian, she would do something in my place and certainly in my useless brother's place—or so I'd decided, wanting to ignore the reality of my own helplessness. However...

My prediction turned out to be wrong.

Before Miss Sakurai could trigger any magic...my brother unleashed a huge spell, like a thunderbolt striking from the clouds. It was so fast I didn't even realize that was a sign he'd activated something.

The black shadows grew larger as they descended—had they fallen apart?

Did...he do that?

Without any tools to help him...?

I came up with several doubts and denials to this premise, but I was a magician. I understood beyond a shadow of a doubt that this phenomenon was an event alteration caused by my brother's spell. I also knew it was an extremely high-level spell—the dismantling of a structure by interfering with the object's structural information.

*He doesn't have any magic ability, aside from disabling an opponent's magic.
He did this?*

Was it possible that I knew nothing about this brother of mine?

Did I understand anything at all about him?

As Miss Sakurai blasted her spells underwater, I watched my brother's back from the bench as I curled up into a ball.



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

While he was looking out the window, Tatsuya suddenly turned around to the entrance.

From the outside, the mansion looked like a traditional Japanese building, but on the inside, it was an almost unscrupulous blend of both Eastern and Western stylistic choices. East-West chaos may have better described it: Some rooms were entirely Japanese-style, while others were perfectly Western.

This parlor—the “audience chamber”—was one of those perfectly Western rooms. Its wallpaper, ceiling, flooring, lighting, and windows were all taken from Western designs. Even the entrance was a swinging door rather than a traditional Japanese sliding one.

Tatsuya watched said door as a *knock, knock, knock* came from beyond it.

“Come in,” said Miyuki, remaining seated on the sofa.

With a polite “excuse me,” the door opened and a maid appeared. However, she wore a Japanese-style outfit, layering an apron over a kimono. She was most likely a *jochu*, a live-in housekeeper, so perhaps the term *maid* was incorrect. Nevertheless, Tatsuya couldn’t help but get the impression that she was a walking anachronism in this room.

The Japanese maid bowed deeply to them before stepping aside. Behind her stood a man in a suit—a man Tatsuya knew well.

Miyuki covered her mouth with a hand to hide her surprise. She didn’t know

him as well as Tatsuya did, but she was still aware of his identity.

After the man entered the room, the maid bowed again, then closed the door, leaving without explanation. Her only job must have been to guide the man here.

“Been a while, Tatsuya. A whole week, in fact,” joked the man in an even tone. It was Harunobu Kazama, leader of the Independent Magic Battalion.

“Major? Why are—? No, did my aunt call you here?”

Tatsuya almost asked what he was doing here, but he switched gears to get a mere confirmation. Kazama had no reason to personally visit the Yotsuba main house, so it was clear that the Yotsuba had summoned the Independent Magic Battalion’s leader here.

“That’s right,” he replied. “She didn’t tell me you’d be attending as well, though.”

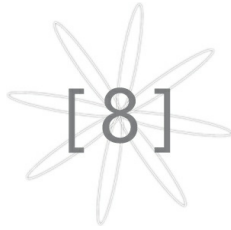
As Kazama entered the room, Miyuki stood up. “My apologies, sir,” she said.

He’d only spoken the truth; he wasn’t petty enough to take offense over something like surprise guests. Tatsuya knew that, so he passed it off with a shrug, but Miyuki seemed unable to ignore the mismanagement on the part of her family member.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” said Kazama.

He and Miyuki didn’t share much in common. Without Tatsuya, they would never have met at all. Therefore, if a third party had been present, he wouldn’t have spoken so candidly with her. He seemed to slip into thinking of her as Tatsuya’s little sister, however, when Tatsuya was the only other one around.

But though they didn’t see each other very often, she first met the man the same time Tatsuya did. Her acquaintanceship with him went back to that incident three years ago.



August 5, AD 2092

Okinawa

Beach House

By the time the JDF's coast guard hastened to their side, the suspicious submarine had already gone into hiding.

Miss Sakurai was furious, saying that this unnoticed entry into their waters was an unspeakable disgrace, but to be honest, I wasn't very interested. I would have rather rested a little than looked for someone to blame. My mental exhaustion ran deeper than my physical exhaustion.

The person in charge of the guards said he wanted to hear the situation from me, but I really wasn't in the mood to talk about it. That went for Mother and Miss Sakurai as well, not just me. We'd told them that if there was anything they wanted to know, they could ask us later. Then we had returned to the beach house.

Right now, I was lying down in my room. I'd taken a good, long shower, but my mind still didn't feel clear. The spell my brother had used clung to my thoughts like a haze, like clouds during the rainy season. If my senses were correct, he had dismantled the targets by directly altering their constructional information.

But if my memory was correct, direct interference with constructional information ranked among the most difficult types of magic. I couldn't do it, and I didn't think Mother or Aunt Maya could, either. And yet, he did it without even a CAD...

Didn't they leave him out of the succession candidacy because he had mediocre magical talent? Wasn't he my bodyguard because he couldn't use magic the way everyone wanted him to?

That's what everyone had been telling me this whole time, and aside from the typeless anti-magic Program Dispersion, I'd never seen him use such a high-level spell.

He couldn't use typed magic, the mainstay of modern magic, very well. Instead, he applied both his unique skill—anti-magic—and his high physical abilities to make a place for himself among the Yotsuba. Supposedly, that was why they made him my Guardian.

I didn't know. I didn't understand. He was my family. We were siblings. But I didn't know anything. Until now, I didn't even realize I didn't know anything.

I was stunned.

When I thought about it, this was the first time we'd gone on a real vacation away from home since entering middle school. Wouldn't that mean yesterday was the first actual time my brother was guarding me by himself?

I was six, and he was seven—those were our ages when he became my Guardian, and I the one he would protect. Six years later, he was still serving as my bodyguard.

But they could never leave my guardianship up to a child in elementary school—one who ran the risk of being kidnapped or injured.

That must have been why I didn't know his true worth, his real power...

Then, who could I ask to find out who he really was? Mother? Miss Sakurai? Or perhaps Aunt Maya?

Just as I found a thread I could use to escape from the maze of my thoughts, there came a knock at the door. Startled, I hurriedly rose from the bed. As I combed my hair, I asked what they needed.

"I apologize for disturbing your rest," said Miss Sakurai from the other side, her voice hesitant. "Someone from the Defense Force says he wants to talk to you..."

“To me?” I responded as I opened the door. I knew my attitude in doing so wasn’t very proper, but I was so surprised that I did it anyway.

“Yes...I told him that Tatsuya and I would answer whatever he wanted to ask, but...” Miss Sakurai looked at me with a very apologetic face, but it wasn’t like she was at fault... Seeing her so ashamed about it stung my own conscience.

“I understand. In the living room?”

Miss Sakurai nodded, so I told her I would get changed and come down right away.

The soldier who came to question us was named Captain Harunobu Kazama. After brief introductions, the man moved right to the reason he’d come.

“...Then, spotting the submarine was a coincidence?”

“The captain’s assistant was the one who spotted it,” answered Miss Sakurai. “Please ask him what led him to it.”

“Did you see anything about the submarine that might give us a clue to its nationality?” he pressed.

“It was underwater at the time,” she answered dubiously. “An amateur like me wouldn’t be able to figure that out. Even if it had been above the water, I don’t know anything about the characteristics of submarines.”

The question-and-answer session was between the captain and Miss Sakurai. It appeared that Mother had left everything in her hands, and at the time, I wasn’t calm, so I couldn’t interject with anything even if I’d wanted to.

“It fired torpedoes at you, correct?” the captain continued. “Do you have any ideas as to why?”

“Of course not!”

Miss Sakurai seemed pretty angry. She was unhappy with how the JDF responded to begin with, and the captain’s question, which implied they did something they shouldn’t have, struck a nerve. It made sense she would be angry with him.

As Miss Sakurai glared at the military man, he turned to Tatsuya instead. “Did you notice anything?” he asked. Maybe facing his way didn’t have any deep

meaning. Maybe he just wanted to look somewhere else to dull the thorny mood.

“I believe they may have been trying to abduct us so that there wouldn’t be any witnesses, sir.”

But my brother’s reply was so clear and concrete that it seemed unnatural.

“Abduct?” parroted the captain, clearly surprised as well. But at the same time, he looked interested and prompted my brother to go on.

“The torpedoes they fired at the cruiser were foaming torpedoes, sir.”

“Really...?”

Foaming torpedoes? ...Torpedoes that foamed—they caused a lot of bubbles...?

“What’s a foaming torpedo?” asked Miss Sakurai in my place as I wondered. She didn’t ask the captain—I think it was because her anger toward him hadn’t settled yet.

“It’s a torpedo made with chemicals in the tip that cause a chemical reaction, which makes a lot of bubbles over a long period of time,” answered my brother. “Areas filled with bubbles can render screw propellers useless. Because our sailboat had a high center of gravity, it’s likely it would have capsized, too. The weapon was designed to stop boats and capture their personnel while disguising it as an accident.”

“What makes you think they were doing this?” questioned the captain, looking at my brother with very keen interest. I was just shocked my brother knew about things like this.

“They jammed our cruiser’s radio, sir,” he answered. “That’s something you need to do if you want it to look like an accident.”

And I was even more surprised that, in the chaos of the situation, he’d managed to observe that the radio wasn’t working.

“...I don’t think that’s quite enough evidence to prove the type of weapon, though,” said the military man.

“Of course, sir. There was more to it.”

“You mean you have more evidence?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is it?”

“I decline to answer, sir.”

“...” The captain was speechless against my brother’s casual, unhesitating declaration that he wouldn’t speak. Actually, Miss Sakurai and I were both surprised as well.

“Do you need the evidence, sir?” pressed my brother.

“...No, we don’t,” said the captain, looking like he wasn’t sure how to handle him.

“Captain, why not leave things at that?” said my mother suddenly, her voice sounding disinterested. She’d been silent ever since the introductions. “I don’t believe we can tell you much that will help your investigation.”

She sounded detached—and that made it difficult to resist.

The captain immediately recognized the implied refusal. “I agree. Thank you for your cooperation,” he said, rising with composure and thanking us.

My brother and I went outside to see the captain and the others off.

A car was parked on the road in front of the house, and two well-built soldiers stood at attention near it.

One of them looked at my brother’s face, and his eyes went wide.

I knew that face as well. He was the delinquent Leftover Blood soldier we got involved with on the promenade yesterday evening.

“I see.” Captain Kazama took one look at his soldier’s shock and nodded knowingly. “So you were the boy who punched Joe out.”

I reflexively went on the defensive when I heard that.



But after seeing the captain grinning in amusement, I relaxed.

Meanwhile, my brother didn't show any physical response.

"You have an astounding natural gift, to have mastered the through-strike at such a young age."

Even though the captain scrutinized my brother up and down, he didn't show any signs of displeasure.

What's a through-strike? It sounds like a really high-level martial arts skill...

"Private Higaki!" called out the captain, as though suddenly angry with him.

The delinquent soldier from yesterday perked up. Disconcerted by the captain's firm stare, he ran up. He saluted, then remained at attention as his superior cast a sharp glance at him.

And then he turned back to my brother and lowered his head. "My subordinate was rude to you yesterday. Please accept my apology."

The sight was such a surprise that I no longer knew what to say.

All he'd done was clasp his hands behind him, open his legs, and lower his head a little. As far as social manners were concerned, it was a crude apology. But it was just too much of a shock to see a stern-faced soldier like this captain apologizing earnestly to a kid like my brother.

"I am Private First Class Joseph Higaki, sir! I apologize for my rudeness yesterday, sir!"

On the heels of the captain's words, PFC Higaki made his statement with a stiff and formal attitude—entirely different from yesterday—and, unlike the captain, bowed deeply.

It seemed to me he wasn't actually a bad person. More importantly, he looked scared of his captain.

"...I accept your apology," answered my brother after a pause.

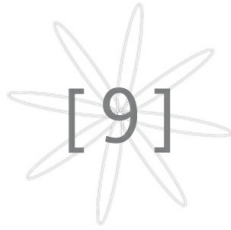
"Thank you, sir!"

I didn't have any argument, either. I never intended to interject in the first place.

As Captain Kazama began to accompany Private Higaki back to their large, open-topped vehicle, he stopped before going three steps and turned around.

“Tatsuya Shiba, was it? I’m currently stationed as a paratrooper magician unit instructor at Onna Base. If you have the time, please come visit. I think you’ll take an interest in us.”

Captain Kazama left us with that and, without waiting for a response from my brother, climbed into the car.



August 6, AD 2092
Okinawa
Beach House—Onna Air Base

On the morning of the third day of our vacation, there were signs of a coming storm. The sky was leaden and cloudy, and a strong wind was blowing. The tropical cyclone from the sea to the east had drawn close. They said that it wouldn't develop into a typhoon at this point, but the depression was apparently only a step away from being one. Every channel said to avoid water sports for the day, but nobody would think about going all the way to the beach in this weather. And going out to sea was out of the question.

We planned on staying here for two weeks, so we could afford not to act unreasonably for one or two days.

"What plans do you have today?" asked Miss Sakurai as she handed Mother a piece of bread fresh out of the oven.

"Well, I don't know if I want to go shopping today, after all..." said Mother as though to herself, cocking her head. Whenever she did something like that, it made her seem neat and cute, much younger than her age. She really had aged well. "What should we do?" she asked.

Miss Sakurai stopped eating as well and tilted her own head.

She looked youthful for the most part, too, but compared to Mother, she seemed like the older sister... *Though Mother's actually a lot older than she is.*

"Well...what do you think about watching Ryukyu dancing?" suggested Miss Sakurai, turning on the screen hanging on the wall. She swiftly used a nearby

remote control to call up a guide to a Ryukyu dancing performance. “It looks like you can even put on the clothing they wear to experience it.”

“That sounds fun. Miyuki, what do you think?”

“I think it sounds fun, too.”

“Then, I’ll prepare a car. There is one problem, however...” said Miss Sakurai, her face clouding slightly. “This performance is women only.”

Oh, she was right. It said it on the bottom of the screen in the guide. Then, my brother...

“I see...” said Mother, bringing a thinly sliced piece of bread to her mouth and eating it. “...Tatsuya, you may use the day as you see fit.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The captain invited you to the base yesterday, didn’t he? This is a good opportunity, so I want you to go and learn from them. They may even let you take part in their training.”

“I understand.”

She said he could spend it freely, but she still ordered him to go along with her idea. Showing no sign of displeasure or grievance, my brother accepted this with an impassive face.

Like always.

“Umm, Mother!”

I didn’t know why I said that.

“May I, umm, go with...Brother...as well?”

My lips and tongue and vocal cords were moving of their own accord. I stumbled over calling him “Brother” out loud, since I usually referred to him as just “him.”

It wasn’t because I was nervous... At least, that’s what I told myself.

“Miyuki?” inquired my mother.

I knew my suggestion was sudden. I predicted this would happen. She gave

me a dubious look.

Ugh, this is so uncomfortable! “Ah, umm, I’m interested in what kind of training the army’s magicians do, and, well, as his mistress, I feel that I must understand my own Guardian’s abilities, so...”

“I see... I’m impressed.”

I felt a lot of resistance to calling myself mistress. In any case, it was clearly a distressed excuse, but Mother seemed to have believed me.

Now I felt sort of guilty... But I wasn’t trying to lie to her—how could I tell a fib when I didn’t understand what I wanted anyway?

“Tatsuya,” said Mother, “as you heard, Miyuki will go with you for your tour of the base.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Such being the case, I have one warning. When in front of others, don’t speak formally to Miyuki. Call her Miyuki, not ‘my lady.’ I forbid any words or actions that could possibly let them realize Miyuki is the next leader of the Yotsuba.”

“...I understand, ma’am.” This time, there was a slight pause before my brother agreed.

He wasn’t the only one bewildered. I was perfectly puzzled myself. Not at my candidacy being removed from consideration for the time being but at imagining my brother calling me by my name.

“Please do not misunderstand me. This is merely a convenience to deceive any unrelated parties. There is no change in your relationship with Miyuki.”

Mother’s words felt a bit unnatural to me. My brother simply answered, “I won’t forget it, ma’am.”



We may have been on vacation, but they were on the job at a national facility. So as not to be rude, for our visit to Captain Kazama’s base, I chose a short-sleeved and modestly patterned dress that didn’t expose much skin and a UV-protected see-through cardigan while my brother’s attire consisted of a plain,

short-sleeved polo shirt and a summer jacket, plus ankle-length cotton pants.

“I’m Sanada, from the Ground Defense Force’s weaponry R & D division,” said the soldier who came to meet us, introducing himself.

When my brother heard that he was a first lieutenant, he looked surprised.

But why...? I felt like he was much more expressive around other people.

“Is something the matter?” the lieutenant asked.

“No, sir...” said my brother. “I just didn’t think we would have an officer showing us around. Especially because I heard this is an air base.”

Mr. Sanada’s lips turned up at that. It seemed like his attitude had just gotten a little friendlier. “You know quite a bit about the army, don’t you?”

“My martial arts instructor used to be in the Ground Defense Force.”

“I see, I see... The reason a technical officer from the Ground Defense Force like me is at an air base is because my profession is rather unique, and the air force doesn’t have enough people for it. As for why they didn’t leave you with a noncommissioned officer... Well, that’s because they’re hopeful about you,” said Lieutenant Sanada, giving an amicable smile. He wasn’t particularly handsome, but his features had an attractiveness about them that dampened others’ caution.

But for some reason, it looked like my brother was poised to defend himself upon seeing the smile.

Mr. Sanada showed us to a high-ceilinged gymnasium. I call it a gymnasium only because that was the closest concept in my mind, so maybe it had a different name.

Several ropes hung from the ceiling, which was about as high as a five-story building, and a large group of soldiers were repeatedly climbing the ropes, then jumping down from near the ceiling. They didn’t have any parachutes. I doubted a parachute would be much help from that height anyway, but they were clearly high enough up to break bones upon landing.

Acceleration-type magic, deceleration spells...

There were about fifty, give or take.

All the soldiers ascending and descending the ropes were magicians. They didn't look like experts, but this wouldn't be all the magicians at this base. Getting so many magicians to a place in the countryside... I supposed that was because this was the front line on the border. I could see the delinquent soldier from before, too—umm, Private Higaki. *So he's a magician, too...*

Captain Kazama had been waiting for us. He probably knew we were here as soon as Mr. Sanada came out to greet us, but I didn't think he'd leave training supervision to a subordinate to wait for our arrival. No—to wait for my brother's arrival, not ours.

"I see you came right away. Should I interpret this as you having an interest in the military?" began Captain Kazama, making an awkward smile on his stern face.

"I do," said my brother. "But I haven't decided whether I want to be a soldier yet."

"Well, I shouldn't think so. You're still a middle schooler, right?"

The captain was speaking differently than yesterday. It felt like he had some kind of ulterior motive—though calling it such may have been harsh.

"I just started middle school."

"Twelve—no, thirteen? You sure seem composed for someone so young."

"Thirteen, sir."

My brother gave innocuous answers to the captain's questions. To be honest, I couldn't help feeling surprised, but I quickly realized it was no more than a misunderstanding on my part due to my assumptions.

At school, he was an honors student. He was during elementary school, too, and even having just entered middle school, he excelled in areas that had nothing to do with magic. It would be a stretch to call him sociably inclined, but his classmates and younger students relied on him for several things, and even the teachers had accepted that he had them beat.

What if he'd been born into a family with no connection to magic?

What if he hadn't been the nephew of the Yotsuba family head?

What if he hadn't been Mother's son?

What if he hadn't been...my brother?

...There was no point thinking about it. It was the same as supposing I didn't have the blood of Miya Yotsuba in me.

When I pried my thoughts from the topic, my brother and Captain Kazama had gotten to talking about whether he wanted to join their rope-climbing training. Not me, of course—just my brother.

"I'd rather not. I'm, well, not very successful with magic."

Hearing him stumble over his words gave me the creeps. Was he doing it because Mother warned him to appear normal? *It doesn't suit him very well... Oh, but what I think looks good on him isn't important!*

"Umm, my brother—" I started, once again feeling a strong sense of wrongness at calling him that. But why? He was, in fact, my older brother, so calling him as much should have been normal. "How did you know he was a magician?"

But it would have been incredibly unnatural to get stuck in something like that. This was the more important thing.

My brother never carried a CAD, nor, of course, any traditional support tools like paper talismans or vajras. Mother and I made regular use of portable device-shaped CADs, and Miss Sakurai should have been the only one you could tell was a magician by the way she looked.

Had he investigated our identities...?

"...Just a hunch, I suppose?" Captain Kazama didn't seem to think I'd ask him a question. He looked a little surprised, but then he answered in a way that didn't seem serious, even though his expression was.

A hunch? What is that supposed to mean? Is he trying to evade my question?!

"And I'm not trying to hide anything, either."

What?!

It was as though he'd read my mind. I couldn't stop my face from hardening.

“When you see hundreds of magicians, you start to be able to tell from how they feel,” said the man. “Whether or not they’re a magician. And whether they’re a strong magician or a weak one.”

I couldn’t resist making a perplexed expression, even though I knew I shouldn’t have.

“Any particular reason it was bothering you?” asked the captain.

This isn’t good...! My overreaction had made him suspicious. Mother had just gotten done telling us not to let anyone know we had a relation to the Yotsuba, too!

“I’m sorry, sir,” broke in my brother. “My sister is kind enough to worry about my lack of magical talent, so...she’s normally a little nervous about it.”

...And as I was up a creek, at a loss and doing nothing but panicking, it was my brother who shielded me.

“I see. She’s a good sister, huh?”

“Thank you, sir. I’m proud to be her brother.”

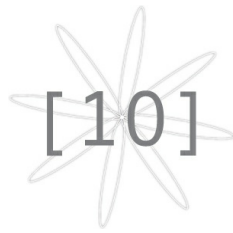
“Ha-ha. I’m jealous you two are close.”

To me, my brother’s words sounded like stinging sarcasm. But he probably didn’t mean it like that.

I was in trouble, so he had helped me. That was all. I was pretty sure I wasn’t so cynical that I couldn’t accept something like that.

But why did he show me the consideration at all? My bewilderment had nothing to do with his role as my Guardian. He gained nothing from protecting the Yotsuba’s secrets. They wouldn’t scold him—only me.

So why did he defend me like normal siblings, like a brother would a sister?



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

“I have to say, you’re even more secretive than I’d heard,” said Kazama suddenly, without context, as he and Tatsuya spoke. It pulled Miyuki back to reality.

“You could tell, sir?”

“Who do you think I am?”

Tatsuya gave a dry grin and bowed lightly in apology.

“I couldn’t tell until I was invited inside, but... This may not be as bad as a frontline field hospital, but there are very few places so thick with the stench of death.”

Miyuki frowned in spite of herself at the man’s unreserved evaluation.

Tatsuya knew his sister’s expression was probably unconscious. *Can’t blame her*, he thought. *This is the infamous Lab Four site, after all.*

“The fourth magic technician laboratory, the four of death... You really can’t tell from looking at the building aboveground.”

With modern magic on the rise, Japan, like other advanced countries, established research institutes for the development of magicians. Of them, numbered one through ten, half were still in operation. The remaining half were shut down because of the inhumane research methods used before magicians had started to recover their human rights.

Rumored to be the most blind to humanity and life was Magician Development Institute Four, also called Lab Four.

The research carried out in Lab Four was so secret the only thing anyone knew was that it had been closed down, without even its whereabouts being revealed. But as it turned out, the old center of Lab Four was underneath the Yotsuba main house.

The magicians developed at Lab Four were the Yotsuba, the only ones given the number four in their name. Other magicians existed with the character for *four* in their surname, such as the Yomo, the Shihoudou, and the Watanuki, but none of them were part of the Ten Master Clans or the Eighteen Support Clans. They simply possessed the character *four* by coincidence, unrelated to Lab Four; the Yotsuba were the only magicians that had come from the lab.

“The research facilities are all underground,” explained Tatsuya. “And not only this mansion—all the houses in the village are disguised Lab Four facilities.”

“Looks like it. It surprised me three years ago when I found that out, too.”

“Well, the surface facilities are still used for magician ability tests, and the dojo in the mansion has a high-usage frequency... I wonder if the scent of death you smelled is the corpses of culled magicians.”

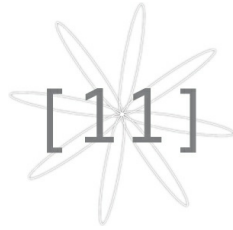
“And so the Yotsuba Guardians were trained literally side by side with death. I see. Which is why a little training right after joining the army wouldn’t let him stand up to a child.”

When Miyuki had first learned of this, she’d actually covered her ears to block it out. These days, she could accept the facts honestly.

But even now, it stung her heart.

She couldn’t get used to this pain.

She hoped she never would.



August 6, AD 2092

Okinawa

Onna Air Base

The rope-climbing training ended shortly after we arrived for our tour. After that, they began practicing martial arts in pairs. It might have been interesting for those into such things, but I couldn't even tell the difference between karate and *kenpo*, so honestly speaking, I grew bored of it quickly. I couldn't see my brother's true ability just by watching this.

Maybe I should excuse myself early... No, I can't. My brother wouldn't leave my side, and if I did that, what will I have come here to see? That would simply be far too rude. If only I could watch him practicing with them...

Obviously, there was no way he could have read my mind, but Captain Kazama suggested the same. "Shiba, you must be bored just watching, right? Want to join the practice?"

My brother gave me a glance. "Yes, sir. If you would be so kind."

Wait... Did he just completely see through to the fact I was bored? My face reddened. *Meanie, meanie, meanie! Why do you always have to notice the things you don't have to?!*

...He didn't even show a hint of laughter. My voice of reason told me this was all just childish venting. But my emotions kept on yelling at him.

I...I hope they beat you up, Brother!

I only thought the words, but I couldn't deny the odd feeling it gave me to call him that. It was as though something was telling me there was something

better I could be calling him.

But what was it...?

I no longer understood my own mind very well.

They called over a sergeant of middling height and build, who looked in his late twenties or early thirties, to be my brother's opponent.

"Shiba, you don't need to hold back," said the captain. "Sergeant Toguchi was in national boxing meets when he was a student. He's very good."

Did that mean he was on a national level of skill even without magic?

Instead of taking steps, the man slid his feet across the floor, closing the distance little by little. It looked like a karate match, not boxing, but maybe this was the boxing style in Okinawa. Or maybe the air force's style.

As my amateur mind was preoccupied with this, the practice match quickly came to an end. Just as there was a gap in my thoughts, my brother had swiftly closed in and thrust out his right hand.

That was my guess, at least, from the result I saw.

What I'd actually seen was him already having gotten in close to Sergeant Toguchi and punching him in the solar plexus with his right hand.

The sergeant collapsed without even a squeal, managing to fall to his knees without toppling over completely.

"Toguchi!"

A soldier watching them ran up to him with haste and began first aid—or what I thought was first aid—on the now-sweaty sergeant.

My brother went back to his original position and bowed lightly. He looked like he was both paying respect to the opponent he'd beaten and showing off the fact that he'd won.

"Well, well..." murmured Captain Kazama next to me in admiration. Lieutenant Sanada's eyes were wide, and he couldn't speak. "Corporal Haebaru!"

"Yes, sir!" At the captain's shout, a soldier in his midtwenties ran out

energetically.

He was skinnier than the sergeant from before, but he didn't seem weak in the slightest; he was like a sharply forged blade, as though all his impurities had been scraped away by fire, hammer, water, and whetstone. Considering how the captain called for him, he was probably more skilled than the sergeant.

"You don't need to hold back," said the captain. "Give him your all!"

"Yes, sir!"

As the words were leaving his mouth, Corporal Haebaru charged at my brother.

That's not fair! A thirteen-year-old kid can't possibly stand up to a trained soldier fighting seriously!

The cry of *Stop!* almost made it out of my mouth. But I didn't actually speak it. I heard impressed murmurs from around me.

My brother had barely evaded the corporal's fierce attack with speed exceeding that of a blur.

And not by a hair did he avoid the punches and kicks—but by a mile.

"He's adept at real combat," said Lieutenant Sanada. "Look at how he's keeping his distance—he's considering the possibility his opponent has a hidden weapon."

"Yeah," replied the captain.

I didn't understand at least half of what they were saying, but it was clear even to my layman's eyes that my brother was at least as good as the man.

You only had to look at the strain in the corporal's face to see that. Despite his unrelenting offense, he was anxious.

Oh! —My brother counterattacked.

But that corporal was good, too. My brother then threw a right punch, then a left, then a right, then a left. But the man repelled all of them, and right when my brother was defenseless, he moved in for the attack!

I almost shut my eyes, but something inside me calmly whispered that I didn't

need to. That it would take more than this to take him down.

The moment I saw the corporal's right hand connect with my brother...his body slipped past the corporal's waist.

His right hand had grabbed Corporal Haebaru's right sleeve at around the elbow. Then, his motion stopped, and it dragged the corporal along with him, sending the man's body into a swivel until he bared his chest to my brother.

Then my brother stepped in and buried his right elbow in it.

With a wet grunt, the corporal staggered a few steps back.

The captain barked, "Enough!" and signaled the end of the bout.

After receiving treatment, my Guardian and Corporal Haebaru shook hands. A crowd of people had formed around them. As rough praise flew my brother's way, the captain stepped between them. I followed him out through the hole he left in the crowd.

"You even beat Corporal Haebaru," said Lieutenant Sanada. "I'm impressed. He's one of our top ten fighters."

"I hadn't thought you'd be quite this skilled," said Captain Kazama, staring at my brother with interest. "Have you had some sort of special training, I wonder?"

"No, sir, nothing unique. If I had to say, my mother's house has a dojo, and they let me practice there."

"Really...?" The captain didn't look completely convinced, but he nodded, his face implying he wouldn't pry any further for now. "Still, at this rate, the Onna paratroopers' honor will be destroyed... Could I ask for one more go-around?"

Instead of prying, the captain suggested something quite selfish. He was the one who invited my brother to train in the first place. And now that my brother had beaten his subordinates, he wanted to save face. What reason could there possibly have been for us to go along with such an egotistical offer?

I tried to gently refuse Captain Kazama's request. *My brother is my bodyguard. I should be allowed to refuse this.*

"Please allow me, sir!"

But I was a step too late. A familiar voice boomed out, interrupting mine. It was the one I'd just heard earlier.

"Private Higaki?" said the captain. "If you're after revenge, I can't allow this."

"Not revenge, sir! Exoneration!"

What's the difference? It's the same thing! I see now that it was a mistake to think he isn't a bad person.

"Hmm... Shiba, you heard him. Would you mind humoring him? Private Higaki is young, but he's good enough to rival Haeburu."

His request is unfair. You should refuse it. We don't stand to gain anything from it.

"I'll spar with him, sir."

Ignoring my feelings, however, my brother agreed to the captain's proposal.

Private Higaki confronted him, with his stance lowered, his hands lifted in front of him, and his eyes peering out from behind them. Even with his waist lowered, his line of sight was at a higher position than my brother's. Their positioning brought to mind a bear about to attack a child.

I felt the pressure crushing me just by watching them.

But as his opponent slowly arced right and left, looking for an opening, my brother simply used his right foot as a pivot and slid his left foot forward to change where his body was facing. His expression was empty.

The tension was stifling, but it didn't last long.

Suddenly, it looked as though Private Higaki's body inflated a good deal bigger. A moment later, his large frame charged at my brother like a cannonball.

So fast...!

My brother avoided it by taking a big jump backward, but it still threw him off balance.

The private wasted no time in charging again. My brother purposely rolled onto the ground, managing to avoid the tackle and put distance between them.

I was astounded by Private Higaki's speed. Still, the candidate for the

leadership of the Yotsuba of the Ten Master Clans, though young, wasn't so weak that she would let her surprise blind her to other things.

"He's using magic?! He's a coward!" I cried in anger at Captain Kazama.

Not even I had seen the man hit his CAD's switch. He concealed it well. But I would never let slip the fact that he'd used magic. The private's speed just now had a self-acceleration spell pushing him!

Captain Kazama turned his head to me at my protest.

The answer, though, came from the other part of what the captain was still half looking at.

"Stop, Miyuki!"

My brother's words shocked me on two levels.

He just gave me an order.

He just called me Miyuki.

"There was never a rule that said we weren't allowed to use magic for our sparring match," he stated decisively.

He wasn't speaking respectfully to me. He was calling me Miyuki instead of a formal title. Though he was following Mother's orders, my brother's own will had rebuked me.

My brother, by his own volition, had just scolded me for naive thinking.

Instead of being angry or rebellious at the prospect, I felt an odd sensation rise up in my heart, numb and aching.

As I stood there unable to say anything, Captain Kazama, next to me, let loose his own scolding. "Higaki, focus on the match!"

Belatedly, I realized something. The air around my brother had changed. It was like the lights had dimmed a little. That was an illusion, of course. My brother was emanating a pressure that induced tunnel vision in those watching him.

He changed his stance, pointing his right palm at the opponent and holding his right arm straight out. He brought his left hand up to the inside of his right

elbow.

Was this my brother's typeless magic stance...?

All of Private Higaki's muscles swelled again. This time, he dived at my brother, meaning to sweep his legs out—but then...

My brother released a torrent of psions from his right hand.

The psi-waves shot through the private's body, massively decelerating the man's charge.

I knew it...! Program Demolition!

Psions blustered like a storm, breaking the self-acceleration magic program applied to the private's body through sheer force and at the same time rocking the connection between his mind and body. The more skilled a person was at controlling their body directly with their mind—instead of automatic nervous impulses—the graver the damage imparted by external psionic interference.

It was like Private Higaki had forgotten how to tackle somebody.

The private careened toward him defenselessly, and my brother, opening his stance, brought a gentle-looking strike down upon his head. The man's giant body spun around like a top and flew away like a joke.

As Private Higaki lay on the floor, limbs sprawled and eyes on the ceiling, my brother walked up next to him. The man only panted with exhaustion and showed no signs of getting up.



My brother, face impassive, offered his right hand.

After a moment of hesitation, the private grinned and grabbed it. He tugged on his hand.

Is it a trap?!

But I was overthinking it. Even my brother had to hold tight because of the weight difference, but the man didn't pull him to the ground, instead using his hand to get himself to his feet.

"...All right, I lost. Completely. Now I know what happened yesterday wasn't a slipup on my part."

He didn't speak very loudly, but for some reason, I made his voice out quite well.

"Let me introduce myself again. Leading Private Joseph Higaki of the Japan Air Defense Force's Okinawan Sakishima Air Unit's Onna paratroopers. Could you tell me your name?"

"Tatsuya Shiba."

"Got it, Tatsuya. You can call me Joe. You'll be in Okinawa for a while longer, right? If you get bored, give me a call. Despite how I might look, the people around here know me."

"That's enough, Joe. Back to training," said Captain Kazama, grinning. Private Higaki straightened up as though shocked by electricity.

Huh... He calls him by his nickname. I wonder if that means he trusts him...?

With my impression of the private flipping around so much, I had a hard time figuring out what kind of person he was. Of course, we wouldn't be seeing him for very long—in fact, we probably wouldn't see him ever again—so I supposed it didn't particularly matter what he was really like.

"Sorry for asking so much of you, and thank you—it looks like my subordinates' minds are clear now," said the captain to my brother. "Why not join me for some tea for a bit over there? I'd like to ask you about the far-strike, too, if you're willing to talk about it."

Far-strike must have meant his untyped magic. I felt increasingly like I couldn't underestimate this man, but it was difficult to refuse his invitation in this situation.

"Then, that psi-wave was Program Demolition?"

"That can't be all. I thought I spied some of the old mainland spell Point Cut's effects in there."

He mentioned tea, but they brought coffee.

On our side were my brother and I. On their side were Captain Kazama and Lieutenant Sanada.

A coffee break for four.

It felt odd to me. Captain Kazama was talking to my brother. Lieutenant Sanada was also talking to my brother. All they needed from me was to put in a word or two here and there as his sister, which I did, almost forgetting the fact. Right now, my brother was in the lead, and I was an accessory.

"...It doesn't look like you're carrying a CAD, Shiba." When he said "Shiba," he was referring to my brother; I was Shiba's sister. "What are you using for assistance?"

This was the first time I'd experienced this. And strangely enough, it wasn't unpleasant.

"I use a specialized CAD, but I'm having trouble finding one that feels right... I'm not very good at properly using magic that uses CADs."

"Hmm, is that so? I wouldn't think handling one would cause you difficulty, as used to controlling psions as you seem to be."

Thus, the topic of conversation shifted from the untyped magic he used to his CAD.

"Shiba," said the lieutenant, "if it's all right with you, would you mind testing a CAD I developed?"

"You make CADs, Lieutenant Sanada?"

"My job is to develop all kinds of magical arms, and that includes CADs. I have

a specialized CAD prototype whose storage is a cartridge instead.”

I could almost see a glow from my brother’s eyes. *Almost* might not have sounded like much, but it was wondrous at the time. *How often have I seen him show curiosity so clearly?* I, at least, had barely any memory of it.

“I’d like that,” he said.

...And was that the first time I’d ever seen him clearly state what he wanted to do?

We were led to a clean, tidy research facility that you’d hardly think was inside a base. I’d always thought of military bases as either completely filthy or completely empty and tasteless, so I probably wasn’t able to fully hide my surprise. Perhaps that was why Captain Kazama and Lieutenant Sanada gave me a warm smile.

My brother—impressed or maybe excited—looked around the room. I felt like I’d been getting to see a lot of surprising things about him today. I always thought he was indifferent and unfeeling all the time, but he had emotions and curiosity just like everyone else...

...But if that’s the case, then what does he think of me?

The question suddenly came to mind. My answer formed automatically. I hugged myself, trying hard to stop trembling.

“...Miyuki, do you feel sick?”

Right as my body was about to start shaking, I heard his voice and it stopped. Not only did my body stop—it felt like my heart would stop, too. The moment he said the word *Miyuki*, it felt like he had just answered my question. As if to coldly confirm the answer I’d gotten for myself.

But my brother’s voice wasn’t cold at all—for some reason, it sounded sincerely considerate.

“...No, I’m not sick,” I said. “I might be a little tired. I think I’ll be okay if I sit down. Would you mind if I borrowed the chair over there?”

I excused myself from the captain and sat in a chair by the wall.

I was a little relieved to leave my brother’s side.

My brother took a large gun-shaped CAD in hand and listened to Lieutenant Sanada's explanation. When I looked at him, my doubts from before came to the fore once again, inflated, and leaned heavily on me. No matter how much I tried to swat that question away, it wouldn't leave my mind.

What did my brother think of me...?

I wasn't confident he loved me.

I knew he couldn't possibly *want* to be kind to me.

Maybe he hated me.

If not for me, if only I weren't here, my brother would be able to live as a talented student, a first-rate athlete, and very soon a full-fledged magician for the military.

But I was still more scared of looking away from him, because it would be like letting go of his hand—like letting him shake free of my hand.

"...A compound spell of acceleration and movement is installed in this armament device, and with it, you can have a max firing range of ten miles with 7.62-millimeter bullets..."

"...That's amazing. But how would you actually use...?"

My brother sounded like he was having fun with that big rifle-shaped CAD in his hand, and I caught bits and pieces of his voice.

In the same room, unable to close my eyes or cover my ears, I endured the clinging, insistent dark clouds in silence.

I dearly wished that this would be over soon.

But I used everything I had to maintain a poker face, so that nobody would know of my selfishness.



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

Miyuki rose at a knock on the door.

“The Yotsuba Guardians aren’t special at all,” said Tatsuya. “Even with my conceit, Yanagi crushed me soon after that, and I still can’t defeat my master.”

Tatsuya and Kazama were talking about what had happened after the story Miyuki had thought back on.

“I don’t think you were acting conceited to begin with,” answered the captain, “but I still can’t beat my master, either.”

It seemed like Miyuki had been lost in her mind for only a short time. Still, it felt to her as though she’d remembered quite a few things.

Another knock came at the door—this one firmer.

Miyuki permitted the person entrance, and a young butler entered with an “Excuse me.”

He was very young—in fact, he was still a boy. He didn’t look very much older than Tatsuya. Still, there wasn’t a hint of irritation on his face. His training must have been effective.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” said the boy, suddenly apologizing. “The business with our previous guests ran a bit long... The madam has given me a message: Would you mind waiting just a little longer?”

The madam—that meant Maya Yotsuba. She had never been married, so in a

sense, the title madam wasn't exactly right. However, neither Kazama, nor Miyuki, nor Tatsuya made a hobby of splitting hairs over customary titles. To add to that, none of them cared about the way the butler spoke, which was, while polite, offered from a position above them.

"I don't mind," answered Kazama to the boy after Miyuki and Tatsuya looked at him.

"Thank you very much, sir."

The boy didn't ask after Tatsuya's or Miyuki's opinions, either.

Tatsuya aside, the reason he hadn't tried to ask whether it was convenient for Miyuki was probably because he considered her family or, at the very least, a fellow member of the Yotsuba.

He wasn't mistaken. Tatsuya didn't consider a millimeter of himself part of the Yotsuba, but Miyuki couldn't afford to feel the same. She could deny that she was the eldest daughter of Tatsurou Shiba all she wanted but not that she was Miya Shiba's daughter.

Therefore, she also couldn't deny the fact that she was Maya Yotsuba's niece.



[13]

August 8, AD 2092

Okinawa

Beach House

Our Okinawa vacation had been a source of troubles since day one, but it had regained its peacefulness yesterday. Today had been another quiet day—at least so far. Letting our summer vacation be boring was a concern, but if it was going to do nothing but give me headaches, I'd pass on it.

Four days after our arrival in Okinawa, we were finally able to enjoy a tropical day off. The problem was, I wasn't sure if we included my brother.

It was currently one PM. Instead of taking a nap, I was just reading at the desk in my room, idly browsing a rare hard copy book on magic that Miss Sakurai had found for me.

Who cares if it's just idle browsing? It isn't like I can perfectly understand it anyway.

The only guides on magic that people took the time to put on paper were highly specialized ones. Even magic high school students would have trouble with them. I would have to be a narcissist to think that I, a first-year middle school student, could decode it in a single read through.

He might be able to figure it out, of course.

He—my brother—was, or so I assumed, in his own room, fervently typing away at the workstation he'd brought here, those CADs connected to it.

He'd received a pair of handgun CADs from the lieutenant the day before yesterday. At first, they'd been talking about only letting him borrow them, but

at some point, they'd turned into gifts. It made me want to complain about how lax the JDF seemed. I was certainly smart enough to understand their intent was to make a prior investment, but unfortunately, that venture was certain to fail completely. He was my Guardian, after all. He couldn't become a soldier.

He didn't have any reason to refuse something given to him, either, but they were still only prototypes. They couldn't have intended them as any more than souvenirs for a visitor with a bright future ahead of him.

Nevertheless, he seemed to like them an awful lot. Between that day and today, he'd been fiddling with the CADs' systems whenever he had a free moment. He'd never even hinted that he could do tuning on CADs. This must not have been giving him much time to rest.

Didn't he get bored of it? Was tinkering with CADs really that interesting for him? Well, I said *tuning*, but he was probably only rearranging the buttons and things like that...

The next thing I knew, I was standing in front of his door.

Umm, what did I come here for again? What was I doing?

Despite my inner confusion, my right hand lifted up to knock upon the door.

And in agreement with my inner confusion, my hand stopped just before knocking on the door.

I started to feel like I was a clown with no audience. A third-rate clown, at that. I sighed and lowered my hand. I was about to turn right around and leave, but I was a little too late.

The swinging door clicked and then quietly opened—slowly, in consideration for someone in its path. Thanks to that, it didn't end up hitting me in the nose. What a clichéd skit that would have been. Unfortunately, I had no time to feign ignorance and run away.

"Did you need something?" asked my brother as soon as his face appeared from behind the door, looking like he'd known I was standing there—and he probably had, in fact.

"I, umm, well..."

“Yes?”

He waited very patiently for me to stammer out a reply. With that poker face, which didn't even make you feel like he was waiting, he watched me. His cold gaze accelerated my discomfort.

“Umm, may I come in?!”

I felt overwhelmed by a sense of crisis that if this kept going I would panic, so I decided to push the words out before that happened. After I said it, I thought, *What do I need to go into his room for?!* but it was already too late to do anything about it.

I was probably blushing at the time. Even my brother's eyes widened as I glared at him red-faced—I really didn't mean to glare—but he showed no further surprise, then held open the door for me to enter.

Like always, his room was simple—or rather, empty. The quietly operating workstation in the vacant room loudly made its presence known.

“What did you need?”

I couldn't answer his question. At the time, my mind was glued to the half-disassembled CADs connected to the workstation via bare cords and the endless stream of letters and numbers covering his monitor.

But this is just like a CAD development lab... I was honestly floored.

But the next two words he said tore my mind away immediately.

“My lady?”

“Please don't call me that!” I shouted angrily.

He gave a start and froze. It was really unusual to see him at a loss for words, but I couldn't blame him.

I surprised myself. After all...my voice had come out practically a shriek. It made me sound like I was on the verge of tears. “Oh, I...”

“...”

“Umm, well... You see! If you don't get used to it normally, you could still slip up when you don't expect it, right?”

His expression changed from shock to suspicion. His dubious look seemed unsure of my sanity. It was disheartening, but I rallied my motivation and went through with my lame excuse.

“So please call me M...Miyuki!”

But that was as far as I could go. It took all I had just to say that, and I shut my eyes tightly. With them closed, I clenched my fists like a small child scared of being scolded, without even knowing what I was scared of. That, too, was akin to a small child, unconditionally frightened of a parent’s displeasure.

“...All right, Miyuki. Is this better?”

His answer was gentle. He spoke not in that mature, stiff tone but in a more casual way, like how you’d hear friends talk to each other.

This was probably what he sounded like when he talked to others besides me, to his friends and underclassmen at school.

He spoke to me gently and watched me with a gentle expression.

“...That will be fine.”

And this time, I really felt like I was about to cry. It took everything I had just to hold back the tears.

“Excuse me. I’ll return to my room.”

I didn’t think my endurance would hold out, so I ran away from him. I fled into my room and buried my face in a pillow.

Because now I knew.

Even his kindness was nothing but an act. Even those short words a brother would naturally say to a sister in a normal relationship were just the output of cold calculation.

I didn’t have a reason, but now I knew.

After all, I was his sister.

I hated our relationship, hated how we understood each other only at times like this. I stifled my voice with the pillow and cried.



August 11, AD 2092
Okinawa
Beach House—Air Base

The two days after that were business as usual. He followed me wherever I went, and I did nothing but act petty and controlling toward him.

I had wanted to be kinder to him—in fact, I still do. Because I keep thinking that I can change something if I'm able to be kinder to him.

But back then, all it made me realize was that old habits die hard.

Yesterday, and the day before that, all I did was selfishly order him around. We had another seven days left in our two-week vacation. Would I keep treating him like that for the rest of that time? I felt pathetic.

...Until just a week ago, I never thought about any of this. What on earth had happened to me? I didn't understand myself. I didn't know what I wanted. When I thought about having to spend today in a mental haze yet again, I started to feel blue.

But thankfully—well, I suppose it would be far too indiscreet to call it fortunate—I wouldn't have to worry about all that for long. I would no longer have time to worry about something that trivial.

Just as we were finishing breakfast, all the information devices in the house got an emergency alert.

The alert was issued by the National Defense Force.

In short, a foreign nation had attacked.

I watched the TV, my eyes glued to the screen.

“Invasion from western seas.”

“No declaration of war.”

“Raid by a submarine fleet comprising mainly submerged missile submarines.”

“Currently half-surfaced and attacking the Kerama Islands.”

The flood of unfamiliar terms streaming across the screen almost made me panic. The words *submerged missile submarines*, though, stood out to me. Had the submarine that attacked us during our cruise been a precursor to all this?

“I’ll request that Lady Maya make arrangements for us!” suggested Miss Sakurai, unable to conceal the urgency in her tone.

“Yes, please,” replied Mother with a nod. Even she seemed a little nervous. I couldn’t exactly blame her. Nobody could expect war suddenly arriving on their doorstep without any prior rumblings.

The TV newscaster repeated his request to act calmly, but he seemed so rattled himself that I felt sorry for him. I couldn’t blame him. Telling him *not* to be rattled in this situation would be a strange request.

Panic had yet to actually come over me simply because I didn’t feel like it was real. The escapist notion made it seem like it was all someone else’s problem. I think that was the only thing holding me together.

But...what about him?

He was reading more detailed information off his small wireless device than what was on the TV, looking as though he’d left behind somewhere human emotions such as disturbance, tension, and unrest. He sat there calmly, thinking in silence. If you told me he looked like an elaborate android, I probably would have agreed.

Did he feel like I did? Like it didn’t feel real to him?

Or did he really feel nothing at all?

I stared fixedly at him. Suddenly, he made a face of slight surprise. As I wondered what it could be, he took a communication device out of his summer

jacket's inside pocket.

"Yes, this is Shiba... No, thank you for the other day... To the base?"

I guessed from his response that he must have been talking to the JDF captain and everyone else from the other day. But the base was literally in a state of war now. What on earth could they want?

"I'm grateful for the offer, but... No... Yes, then I'll talk with my mother... Yes, I'll call you back."

I wasn't the only one looking at him as he ended the call. My mother was watching him from the sofa, with only her face turned toward him. My brother stood and bowed to her.

"My lady," he said to his actual mother. Despite the situation, my heart felt like it was being squeezed. Which was a feeling I'd never felt—before one week ago. "Captain Kazama at the Onna Air Base has offered use of their base shelter for us to evacuate to."

"What?!" I cried in spite of myself, then reflexively covered my mouth. We'd met them twice, and only once for real. Why, then? With the string of unexpected occurrences, I felt my emotions saturating, but the surprising news didn't stop there.

"My lady," said Miss Sakurai, handing a cordless voice communication unit—a so-called telephone receiver—to Mother. "It's from Lady Maya."

This time, I couldn't even manage a *What?*

A call from Aunt Maya? For Mother?

I mean, they were twin sisters, so on the surface, it wasn't strange for one to call the other...but it was a well-known secret within the Yotsuba that Mother and Aunt Maya didn't get along very well. They never quarreled, but there was a sort of cold war happening between them. Which was why Mother hadn't contacted her on her own earlier...

Nervous for another reason now, I watched as Mother irksomely put the receiver to her ear.

"Hello? Maya? ...Yes, it's me... I see, so it was you... But isn't this more

dangerous? ...I see... All right, then. Thank you.”

After Mother finished the call, she handed the receiver to Miss Sakurai.

“My lady, what did Lady Maya have to say?” asked Miss Sakurai as she took it, asking the natural-seeming question.

“She says she talked to the JDF so they’d give us shelter.”

“Then, the call Tatsuya just received must have been...”

“Yes, most likely.”

“Wouldn’t that be even more dangerous, my lady?”

“I said the same thing.”

...What? Wouldn’t a military shelter be sturdier and safer than a civilian one?

“They attacked us without warning. We weren’t even in clear hostilities. She says we can’t expect them to follow the rules.”

“That...may be so, but...”

Mother and Miss Sakurai glimpsed my brother’s expression after that. It looked like I was the only one who didn’t understand. Still, I didn’t have the nerve to get them to explain everything, so...for now, I put my questions aside.

“It may not have been much effort, but she did put in *some* for us, at least. Let’s do as Maya says. Tatsuya?”

“Yes?”

Despite having been left to stand there doing nothing until then, he was very quick to respond... He didn’t look dissatisfied, so I figured my concern for him was misplaced.

“Contact the captain and tell him we’ll accept his offer. Also, ask him to come and get us.”

“Of course, my lady.”

It seemed like she was foisting all the actual work on him—but that, too, was probably just me overthinking things.

I predicted this, but...the soldier who came from the base to get us was

Private Joseph Higaki.

“Sorry for the wait, Tatsuya!”

“Thank you very much for coming all this way, Joe.”

“Oh, stop it. You’re acting like we’re total strangers.”

Private Higaki was grinning at him like they were best friends now. My brother was a little more reserved about it, but his expression was pretty casual, too.

No matter how I looked at it, his attitude was friendlier toward this private he’d just met than toward his own family.

My mother knitted her eyebrows. She clearly didn’t appreciate his rude attitude. That had to be it—she couldn’t have been offended by my brother acting more unreserved with a stranger than his kin, right?

Perhaps noticing Mother’s unhappy expression, and perhaps noticing Miss Sakurai’s irritation, Private Higaki put aside his overfamiliar attitude and saluted to us with the stiff formality expected of a soldier.

“I’ve arrived to pick you up on Captain Kazama’s orders!” barked the private, more forcefully than he needed to.

Miss Sakurai seemed slightly nonplussed at that. “Good work,” she answered. “Please lead us there.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Private Higaki didn’t seem to mind at all.

...Honestly, even I understood that they wished he’d be a little more cognizant of the fact that bringing us to the base was more important at the moment.

The roads overflowing with evacuating citizens, the sirens of cars stuck in traffic jams, shouts and cries of people blending together into a melting pot—that was not the scene we saw.

The island was deathly quiet. The only ones traveling the roads were dark military vehicles. It felt more like martial law had been declared rather than an enemy attacking—though, of course, I’d only seen either of those on video recordings, so I didn’t know what it was really like.

After our ride in the JDF communications car, we made it safely to the base without being stopped for inspection or exposed to an enemy attack.

At the time, it was an hour after hostilities commenced. Despite the perfect surprise attack from an unknown nation, the maritime force and air force were holding the enemy off at the water's edge. Still, we had no way of knowing what it was like beyond the island, except for believing what the JDF made public.

What did come as a surprise was that we weren't the only civilians evacuating to the base. Close to a hundred people looked like they were escaping there.

Even in our room, there were another five civilians besides us waiting to be shown into the underground shelter. Not that it was any of my business, but was inviting so many unrelated, useless people into the base a good idea? If it came to it, we—myself included—might end up having to fight.

I couldn't rely on only Miss Sakurai. We needed her to protect Mother, who looked a little pained even just sitting on the sofa, since she wasn't fully recovered yet. I'd had no firsthand experience in battle before today, but my combat magic skills had been certified to be no weaker than adult magicians'. That certification came from Miss Sakurai, too, so I could trust it.

Still, that didn't serve to erase my unease. I quietly glanced at the seat next to me. My brother was sitting there. Normally, he'd be standing behind me or beside me, but we were sitting next to each other now so we wouldn't make a scene.

He had the two handguns—err, CADs—hidden in his inside pocket, ready to use at any time.

He couldn't have had any firsthand experience, either, but unlike me, he'd been through several fights to the death. And he'd killed no small number of people. Plenty more than five or ten. I hadn't been there to see it with my own eyes, but he gained nothing from lying to me about something like that, so it must have been the truth.

As if to prove his experience, he remained unperturbed. He didn't glance around or fidget in his seat. Looking at him eased my anxiety, just a little.

One more time, I thought, stealing another glance at the side of his face.

For some reason, our eyes met at exactly that moment.

Huh? What? Wait. Why?

“It’ll be okay, Miyuki.”

...! Just like he promised three days ago, he called me Miyuki. And not like then, either, when he pretended to be nice—there was real kindness in his voice, albeit not very much.

“I’m right here for you.”

...That’s against the rules...!

I didn’t know what sort of face to make.

I didn’t know what face I was making right now.

Come on! This is just misattribution of an intense emotion! A haunted house! Stockholm syndrome... Well, that’s a little different, but I’m just confused! How dare he so indiscreetly make a move on his actual sister and at a time like this!

I know he isn’t trying to do that at all, and that just makes me even more mad!

I glared at him.



Then suddenly, he rose from his seat.

Huh? Did I look that scary?

...But in reality, there was a sudden development close at hand—one that wouldn't allow me to have any more peace-drunken thoughts. And soon, I'd learn what it was.



My brother wasn't the only one who stood up abruptly. A moment later, Miss Sakurai kicked out of her seat.

The other people we didn't know who were here looked surprised and a little frightened of him and Miss Sakurai.

"Tatsuya, that was..."

"You heard it, too, Miss Sakurai?"

"Then, they were gunshots...!"

"Not just gunshots, either—fully automatics, probably assault rifles."

...*What?* Did that mean the enemy got here to attack us? But why? Weren't we inside a JDF base?

"Can you tell what's happening?" asked Miss Sakurai.

"No, not from here..." he replied. "The walls in this room seem to have magic-blocking properties."

"Yes... It seems an old-style barrier spell has been used. Not only on this room—this entire building is apparently covered by a spell that blocks magical probing."

"I don't believe it will be a problem to use magic inside this room, though."

Miss Sakurai agreed with my brother. I hadn't even realized...

"Hey, a-are you two magicians?" a man sitting a few paces away from my brother and Miss Sakurai suddenly said. He was a man in his golden age, with high social standing from the looks of it, clothes well tailored. The cluster sitting there must have been his family.

“Yes, why?” answered Miss Sakurai, voice dubious at the abrupt question.

Then the man continued like this, his attitude overbearing, though I thought most of it was a front: “Then, go and see what’s happening.”

...What? He was speaking to them just like servants.

You sicken me...!

“...We aren’t base personnel,” replied Miss Sakurai, also angry.

We could play innocent as much as we needed to, but she must have thought we had no obligation to do so when it came to someone with who we had no relationship or connection, or even concern over the interests of.

But Miss Sakurai’s reasonable assertion had no effect on this man: “And what does that matter?” he demanded. “You’re magicians, aren’t you?”

“As I said, we’re—”

This man wasn’t even trying to listen to what she was saying. “Isn’t it your natural duty to serve people?”

...! How is there still someone who can say that with a straight face...? And to a magician’s face, at that...!

“Are you being serious?” Miss Sakurai’s voice was just as menacing as my thoughts. Her eyes were probably even harsher.

Even the man seemed to flinch, but his railing did not stop. “M-magicians were just things made to serve people, right? It shouldn’t matter if you’re in the military or not.”

My anger and shock were so strong that I had no words. The man’s words were something that should never be said. But it was undoubtedly part of the truth, something that more than a few non-magicians still believed in.

“I see. We may be constructed existences...”

The one who argued in my place was my brother, who had been leaving the man to Miss Sakurai until then. In a voice from which I could sense no anger or agitation—a cynical voice, derision bared.

“...but we have no duty to serve you.”

“What?!”

“Magicians serve public welfare and order in human society. A person we’ve never seen before has no right to demand us to serve.”

Serving public welfare and order in human society was a section of the International Magic Association Charter. The phrase was well-known among non-magicians. This man must have heard of it, too, of course.

Which explained his reaction. “Y-you impertinent child!” he yelled at my brother, red-faced and trembling with rage.

When I looked up at my brother’s eyes, they were filled with scorn and pity.

“Give me a break...” he said. “You’re a mature adult. Doesn’t it embarrass you to be acting like this in front of *children*?”

Though he used the same word, *child*, it meant something entirely different. The man, whose name we didn’t even know, gave a start and turned around to his family.

They were all looking up at him. Even his children, with their childlike scrupulousness, did so with gazes of contempt.

My brother sent a parting attack at the shaking man’s back. “And you seem to be misunderstanding something... In this country, over eighty percent of magician descent is from bloodline crossing and growth of latent ability. Even including partial treatment, biologically constructed magicians are only twenty percent of the whole.”

“Tatsuya,” said Mother, calling my brother’s name with an indolent voice as she stayed resting on the sofa. It reined in the situation; though, of course, I didn’t think she intended to do so.

My brother’s gaze left the quivering man’s back. “What is it?”

“Go check on what’s happening outside.”

Mother delivered a forthright instruction, sounding almost indifferent, like she always did.

But unusually, my brother expressed disapproval. “...My lady, without knowing the situation, I can’t ignore the possibility that harm will come here,”

he argued. “With my current skills, I can’t protect Miyuki from afar—”

“Miyuki?” interrupted Mother with a cold voice, and with an equally cold gaze, she narrowed her eyes. “Tatsuya, please remember your place.”

Only her choice of words was kind; her tone sent a chill down my spine. He’d called me by name because I’d asked him to. But after hearing Mother’s soft yet imperious voice, I wasn’t even willing to defend him.

“...My apologies,” said my brother simply, not arguing any further.

“...Tatsuya, I’ll handle things here,” said Miss Sakurai from the side, interceding in the uncomfortable atmosphere.

Mother seemed like she’d lost interest. She looked away from him.

“Understood. I’ll go see what’s happening.” He gave a bow to Mother’s averted face and left the room.

The family of that man, who was looking at us with scared eyes, didn’t even spare a glance at my brother or mother.

I heard a sound from outside like a firecracker.

Obviously, they weren’t having a festival or anything of the sort. The gunshots were now such that even my ears could pick them out.

And gunshots weren’t the only thing that approached. Several sets of footsteps came near and stopped outside the door.

Miss Sakurai moved in front of Mother and me. She’d charged her CAD bracelet with enough psions to expand an activation sequence, but it was difficult to maintain a state like this—where you could use one immediately—for so long. Miss Sakurai’s technique was incredible as always.

Her back was the only thing I could see from where I was, but she was probably glaring sharply at the door.

“Excuse us! Private First Class Kinjou of the Second Paratrooper Division!”

I could feel Miss Sakurai’s tension loosen slightly, but she stayed on her guard. I felt relieved at hearing the voice from outside, too. It looked like the soldiers on the base had come to meet us.

Outside the opened door were four young soldiers. They all looked like second-generation Leftover Blood, but I didn't particularly care. That was just the character of this base.

They were holding hot machine guns; they must have run here for us while trading gunfire with the enemy.

"We'll show you to the underground shelter. Please come with us."

I expected him to say as much, but I couldn't help hesitating. If we left the room now, we'd be separated from my brother.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Sakurai to Private Kinjou before I could, "but one of us has gone outside to see what's happening."

As expected, the private frowned and expressed disapproval. "Part of the enemy has already pushed deep inside the base. It's too dangerous to remain here."

To an extent, that too was the expected answer.

But Mother's remark was wholly unexpected. "Then, please take those people over there first," she said. "I will not leave my son out there."

Miss Sakurai and I silently exchanged glances. When you thought about it, her insistence was only natural. But we couldn't expunge a sense that something was wrong.

"Ma'am, I..."

"You said your name was Kinjou, right?" pressed the man who had been watching us. "You heard what they said. Lead us there first and leave them here if you have to."

The four soldiers, faces stern, looked at one another and began to discuss this in hushed tones.

Miss Sakurai used the moment to make a suggestion to Mother in a low voice. "I don't believe it would be difficult for Tatsuya to find us if he asked Captain Kazama."

"I'm not exactly worried about Tatsuya," whispered Mother in reply. "That was just for show."

That was Mother's reply, whispered in response. I desperately tried to stop my shaking knees. How could Mother be so cold...?

"Then...?"

"Call it intuition."

"Intuition, my lady?"

"Yes. My gut tells me we shouldn't trust these people."

Immediately, Miss Sakurai went on full alert again.

I, too, forgot my knees were shaking.

We weren't talking about a regular hunch. This was Mother's intuition, as someone once feared as the Mistress of Lethe.

Mother's magic of specialty wasn't perception or prescience—it was mental interference. But those who used magic related to the mind tended to have such high intuitive perception that some theories even said they were closely linked to the Akashic Record... Though there were exceptions like me, too.

That was when the group of four finished their discussion.

"I'm sorry, but we cannot leave you all in this room," said Kinjou. "We will take responsibility for guiding the other one there, so please come with us."

They were speaking as politely as before. But why did their attitudes sound threatening now? Was it just my bias talking now?

"Wait, Dick!"

A new person appeared to grant this scene a rapid development.

Private Kinjou suddenly shot at the voice—which belonged to Private Higaki.

There were no windows in the wall facing the hallway, so I couldn't see, but I knew it was Private Higaki. And Private Kinjou had fired his machine gun in that direction.

I heard cries—from that man's family.

Private Kinjou's comrades pointed their guns into the room.

Miss Sakurai expanded her activation sequence—but then a noise, like nails

on glass, went through our heads, blocking her from constructing a magigram.

Were these psi-waves? Cast Jamming?!

I covered my ears and looked at them. One of the four had a brass-colored ring on his hand.

And behind Miss Sakurai, Mother was clutching her chest and leaning over!

This wasn't good...!

Mother always had an oversensitivity to psions. To add to that, her overuse of them in her youth had taken its toll, and recently, her resistance to psi-waves had lowered noticeably.

The psi-waves from their Cast Jamming are having a bad effect on her physically, too. I have to stop it!

"Dick! Al! Mark! Ben! Why?!"

I heard Private Higaki's angry cry through the palms covering my ears. *Thank goodness the bullet didn't hit him...*

"Why are you betraying the military?!"

"Why are *you* putting Japan first, Joe?!" yelled back Private Kinjou between their single shots— *I didn't know you could fire single shots with a machine gun*, I thought inanely.

"Are you insane, Dick?! Japan is our homeland!"

"And how did Japan treat us?! We volunteered for the forces, but no matter how much we work, we're still nothing but Leftover Blood! How long will they treat us like damned outsiders?!"

"You're wrong! Dick, you're being closed-minded! One of our parents *was* an outsider. These people have lived here for generations. It's no wonder they treat us like outsiders! But the forces! Our unit! Our officers and fellow soldiers all treat us as comrades in arms! They accepted us as friends, damn it!"

"That's because you're a magician, Joe! You're worth using—of course they'd brownnose *you*!"

"Is that what you have to say, Dick? You're so mad about them treating us like

outsiders because we're Leftover Blood, and you're saying I'm not part of that just because I'm a magician? Weren't we friends, Dick?!"

The gunshots stopped. And with it, the psi-waves from the Cast Jamming weakened.

This was my chance!

Judging by its instability, the one using antinite was a non-magician without a magic-calculation region. His psion capacity might have been slightly large, but he was just a normal person who couldn't control it. If he thought he could stop me, candidate for next head of the Yotsuba, he was gravely mistaken!

I wouldn't use my CAD. I couldn't waste time starting it up. Which meant there was only one spell I could use:

The mental interference magic I had inherited from Mother. It wasn't mental construction interference like her magic was, but it was still a spell you used on someone's mind.

The spell would freeze it.

I aimed just for him, the one with the antinite, so I wouldn't catch the unrelated people in it...

...and activated my mental freezing spell, Cocytus.

The Cast Jamming stopped. I knew he was now in stasis.

This was the third person I'd stopped.

I hadn't killed them, but they would never thaw. They would never move again from this stasis, which made it the same as death.

I clenched my teeth to endure the guilt.

Because of that, I wasted valuable time with inactivity. What happened next was a reasonable punishment brought on by my own naïveté.

There was more than one of them. And they were pointing their guns this way.

All at once, they pulled their triggers as Miss Sakurai activated her spell. The magic program Miss Sakurai constructed fizzled before it had any effect.

A spray of machine-gun fire punched holes in me, Mother, and Miss Sakurai.

The places I was shot...

They didn't hurt.

They were hot.

But my whole body...

...was cold.

I could feel my life slipping away with the blood flowing out.

I'm going to die...

I thought I'd have more remorse or attachment when I died, but I thought about surprisingly little. If I had one regret, it was that I wanted to properly apologize to him.

Without me here, he could have been more normal.

He could have been free.

I'm sorry.

I'm really, really sorry, Tat—

"Miyuki!"

I thought I was hearing things. I'd been thinking about my brother, so I figured I'd made a voice for him in my head at just the right time.

After all, he would never call my name with such emotion, with such desperation in his voice.

He wouldn't try to keep me here.

I struggled to open my eyes. I saw a sky covered in clouds, the walls disappearing, dead insurgents, and my brother, holding his left hand toward me.

Something came out of his left hand. Something overwhelming.

It easily penetrated the Information Boost wall covering my body, which was on the verge of a regret-filled death, and flowed inside me.

Then my brother's "mind" folded over my body. That was the only way I could describe it. He read in everything about my body and rebuilt all of it. My body, my self, began to be remade.

By my brother's will and by his strength.

It was too tremendous, too precise, too bold and delicate to call it magic.

No. This is magic. True magic, worthy of the name.

I thought I saw the Reaper growing distant. Very frustrated with nothing it could do. That was no more than an illusion, of course. But the soul ferryman in that illusion seemed very human, and I couldn't help but let out a mad chuckle. When I did, I didn't taste blood coming up my throat or anything of the sort.

"Miyuki, are you all right?!"

When my vision cleared, it was filled with the worried face of my brother. It was the first time I'd ever seen such raw emotion in him.

"Tatsuya..."

For some reason, his name left my lips easily. I didn't choke on it, nor did I feel any compunction.

"Thank goodness...!"

I might have been more disturbed.

I might have been more flustered.

Because he was holding me, embracing me, tightly and firmly.

But I felt something then, and maybe it was brazen of me.

...I felt that this was the natural way of things. That Tatsuya's arms were where I belonged.

So when he released me from the embrace, I reflexively grabbed his jacket hem.

He looked back at me, eyes wide, then narrowed them and ruffled my hair.

"Ah..."

I wonder how he interpreted the sound I accidentally made.

He smiled a little awkwardly, and then looked away in embarrassment—before his face hardened. It turned into an impassive mask—though not in the sense of emotional vacancy but rather a fully focused, expressionless face. Seen from the side, he looked like he was desperately trying to recall something.



He was looking toward Mother and Miss Sakurai, whose lives were both about to be extinguished.

“Tatsuya!”

Without answering my call, probably focused so far that he couldn’t, he pulled out a CAD with his left hand.

I could see an unbelievable amount of psions energizing inside him. He was constructing a container of psionic information bodies that could store a vast amount of data.

His index finger pulled the CAD’s trigger.

It looked like Mother’s body was sucked into his left hand.

Of course, that was an illusion.

I didn’t know what he did or how, but I knew what had happened—though I was only able to make an accurate guess because he’d done it to me already.

Tatsuya had copied all the information making up Mother’s body into his own magic-calculation region, processed it, and then overwrote her body’s information with it.

Her gunshot wounds vanished. The bloodstains moistening her clothes and scattered about the floor disappeared.

As Mother’s body fell forward, I ran over to her in a flurry and caught her. She sounded pained, but she was still breathing.

It was the same as before she’d been shot... No, this was... He made it so she had never been shot in the first place?

Brother pointed his left hand’s CAD at Miss Sakurai.

He finished preparing the psion information bodies far more smoothly and swiftly than he had with Mother.

He’s clearly getting used to it...? In just three tries, he’s perfecting this super-advanced spell of completely restoring someone’s body?!

As my body trembled in awe, my mind saw it as a natural thing.

—After all, he's my dear brother—

My chest swelled with pride.

I no longer cared about how foolish my ignorance had been.

Miss Sakurai stared at her own body with a look of disbelief.

Mother's consciousness hadn't returned yet, but her breathing was stable. We were told by an army doctor who'd run to us that she wasn't unconscious, just sleeping. I sighed in relief.

"I'm sorry. Letting those rebels through was entirely our fault. I know nothing I can do will absolve us, but if you have any requests, please tell us. We will do anything we can for you as the National Defense Force."

And next to me, Tatsuya and Captain Kazama were standing opposite each other. Captain Kazama bowed in apology, and Tatsuya said he needn't worry about it.

The reason Tatsuya had just barely made it to the scene was apparently because he'd borrowed Captain Kazama and Lieutenant Sanada's help. Also, those rebels seemed to be planning on kidnapping us and holding us hostage, so looking at the end result, Private Higaki's arrival had saved us from that dark situation—of course, their actual target had been that other man, and it seemed we'd actually only been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The man was an important official in the military industry, and he and his family were all being kept safe in another room. In other words, we almost died for being in the same room as him. Still, thanks to Mr. Higaki buying us time, Tatsuya made it—and that, too, was the undeniable truth.

But if not for that spell he'd used, Mother, Miss Sakurai, and I would all have been dead for certain.

I couldn't emotionally overlook it just like that.

"First, would you please explain the situation in detail?" I asked.

I had no intention of demanding anything for myself, of course. I felt guilty for it, but I wasn't about to let Miss Sakurai interrupt, either. Even if Mother had been awake, I would have made sure she stayed silent.

Because this was Tatsuya's privilege and his alone.

"Are they from the Great Asian Alliance?"

"We have no proof, but there isn't any doubt."

"The story about holding the enemy off at the waterside was a lie, correct?"

"Yes. The enemy submarine landing force has already landed on the shore northwest of Nago City."

...Did that mean the submarine back then was doing a preliminary investigation?

"The enemy has seized control over the waters near the Kerama Islands as well. Our personnel movement in certain places has been obstructed by the activities of guerrillas in contact with the enemy from Naha to Nago."

...The situation was worse than I'd imagined.

"But it's no cause for concern. There were never many guerrillas in the first place. We've already suppressed eighty percent of them. We should also clean up the insurgents from within the military soon," the captain said.

"They've already accomplished their goal of securing a landing point, so they've outlived their usefulness anyway. They can use all the disposable pieces they want; the Great Asian Alliance is always bragging about having too many people, so I wouldn't think that it hurt them whatsoever," Tatsuya pointed out flatly. Captain Kazama made a bitter face. "Next, I'd like you to secure a safe location for my mother, sister, and Miss Sakurai. If possible, somewhere safer than the shelter."

"...We'll keep them safe in the aerial defense command room. The armor in there is twice as strong as the shelter's."

...I was baffled. How could a command room where soldiers hole up in have stronger defenses than an evacuation shelter for civilians? But maybe that was just how military bases were.

"Finally," said Tatsuya, "I'd like to borrow an armored suit and a complete set of infantry armaments. I won't be able to return any consumables, of course."

"...Why?" asked the captain.

I couldn't help thinking his request strange, too. *Why, Tatsuya? And why did you not include yourself among the list of people you wanted to guarantee safety for?*

Trying to gauge his true intent, I gazed into his eyes, then gasped.

In his eyes...

It was something hotter than infuriation.

Raging blue hellfire.

"They laid a hand on Miyuki. I must make them pay the price."

As everyone who heard him had the blood drain from their faces, one person maintained his expression: Captain Kazama, who could only be called courageous.

"You plan on going alone?"

"What I'm trying to do isn't a military action. It's personal revenge."

"I still don't particularly mind. Humans are incapable of fighting unlinked to emotions. Even if fighting for revenge, there's no problem as long as you control it."

Tatsuya's and Captain Kazama's eyes met.

No—they were staring each other down.

"I can't acknowledge the slaughter of noncombatants or anyone who's surrendered, but I'm sure you don't intend to do that."

"I don't plan on giving them time to surrender."

"That's fine. Our mission has been to rebuff or annihilate the invading forces. We don't need to issue a surrender warning."

Captain Kazama's expression was decisive in a different way than Brother's but every bit as strong as his.

"Tatsuya Shiba, we will add you to our line of battle."

Tatsuya's face didn't change at all. "I will not be following the army's orders. What I need to protect is different from what you need to protect. But our

enemy is the same—the invaders—and if we are like-minded in our goal of wiping them out, I'll fight side by side with you.”

He was like a steel blade, forged by a legendary smith—cold, sharp, surrounded by an awe-inspiring air—and I simply watched him, enraptured.

“Very well. Sanada, lend him an armored suit and a set of infantry gear! The paratroopers will sortie in ten minutes!”

“Miss Sakurai, my mother and sister are in your hands,” said Tatsuya, standing stock-still, before he followed after Lieutenant Sanada.

He looked toward me then with a faint smile on his face, and that certainly was no illusion.



“My lady, is this really all right?” Miss Sakurai asked me hesitatingly as I watched Tatsuya leave.

“Is what all right?”

It seemed like my ability to think wouldn't work the same way as it had before, as though it had nodded off to sleep or escaped from the battle.

“Tatsuya may be very skilled, but this is a war he's going to... and the very front lines, at that. Wouldn't jumping in like that be too dangerous?”

“!”

Miss Sakurai's whispered voice sounded to me like an incredibly loud alarm clock going off in my ears.

She was right! Why was I so calmly watching him go? Tatsuya was trying to dive headfirst into a war!

“Miyuki?!” called out Miss Sakurai as I started to run away.

But only her voice came after me. She couldn't leave Mother by herself.

I'm sorry, I said in silent apology. It pained me to leave Mother in her hands when she was all alone, but stopping Tatsuya was more important!

With that one thought in my mind, I moved my feet. Thankfully, Tatsuya hadn't made it very far, and I caught up to him without losing my way.

“Tatsuya!”

I thought for a moment, feared that maybe he wouldn’t turn around, but my concern was clearly groundless. He said a few words to Lieutenant Sanada, who was taking the lead, then stopped and turned around. The lieutenant waited a few paces away. I thought he was probably giving us some space.

“Miyuki, what’s the matter?”

When he called me that so very naturally, his voice completely casual, I felt as though something had touched my heart—but now wasn’t the time to bask in it.

“Tatsuya, I...”

I tried to say, *Please don’t go*, but all of a sudden, I began to think of something I shouldn’t have; that line was exactly what a heroine might say to a lover in a clichéd romantic comedy film (or novel or comic book)—and within the subgenre of forbidden sibling love, no less.

“Miyuki?” He looked at me dubiously when I suddenly lost my words. My cheeks were probably the color of ripe apples.

“...P-please don’t go.” But I still had to say it. I had to stop him. “Please don’t fight the enemy army. It’s too dangerous. I don’t think you need to put yourself in danger like that.”

I said it...! I was filled with a sense of accomplishment, that it would be fine now. Not a fiber of my being thought he would shake his head and disagree with what I’d said.

“You’re right—I don’t need to. I’m not going because I need to—I’m going because I want to, Miyuki.”

That was why his answer shocked me. It was a shock both to be rejected and to hear him speak as though he wished to kill. But my body didn’t try to pull away from Tatsuya; instead, my hand grabbed his jacket.

He gave an awkward smile as he looked down at my hand, then put his hand on top of it.

“Like I said, I’m going to pay them back for hurting you.” He looked into my

eyes, his face troubled. “Not for your sake. So that I feel better about it.”

Even though he said that, in his eyes...

“If I don’t, I’ll never get over it.”

I felt like his eyes were saying it *was* for me...

“The only thing that really feels important to me is you, Miyuki.”

And that wasn’t a lie.

“I’m sorry for being a selfish brother.”

It wasn’t a presumption.

He gently removed my hand, and with the confusion and doubt still on my face, he smiled at me.

My face was probably as bright red as a fully ripened tomato.

But right away, I frowned, noting something odd about Tatsuya’s words.

I feel important to him...?

He didn’t say I was important to him—but that I *felt* important to him. Maybe that was just a different way of putting it and didn’t mean anything...but for some reason, it stuck in my mind.

The words had rushed out unconsciously and weren’t even really a question. Brother gave a dry grin, as though he were unsure of what to do.

His face was smiling, yet at the same time, it seemed like it was weeping. He wasn’t actually crying, of course, and I’d never seen him look sad enough to shed tears in the first place. But without a reason, I felt like the topic was a sad one for him.

So I apologized. “I’m very sorry!” I said. I couldn’t possibly make him any sadder than this, I thought, quickly and vigorously bowing.

A youth’s delicate hand parted my long hair and slid across my cheek. Though delicate, his hand was far bigger than my own, and firm and strong.

I let his hand move my face and looked up at him. He hadn’t used his strength, but I couldn’t possibly go against it. Before I could even think that

disobeying would be absurd, my body had followed his intent.

“Well...it’s a good time for you to learn. I would have liked to keep it from you if I could, but...as long as you’re Mom’s daughter and *her* niece, I don’t think we can get away with that.”

Tatsuya’s words were directed at me, but he wasn’t saying them to me—it sounded like he was letting himself hear them.

“Tatsuya?”

“There’s no time right now, and I don’t think you should hear this from me. Go and have Mom tell you about it—the answer to the question you have right now.”

“Ask Mother...?” I simply parroted his words back, with no time to have doubts about them, and he gave me another smile, this one a strong, reliable one.

“Don’t worry, Miyuki. You’re the only one I feel is important to me. I’ll keep protecting you in the future, so I’ll return unharmed.”

He wasn’t lying. These weren’t empty words to make me feel better.

“I’ll be fine.”

His smile withdrew, and his face tightened into an unwavering expression.

As if to say it was the absolute truth.

“There is nothing that can *truly* hurt me.”

That was why I believed him—that there wasn’t a person anywhere in the world that could harm him.

Tatsuya took his hand from my cheek and moved it to my head, then rubbed my hair.

As I put my own hand to my now somewhat messed-up hair, he smiled a third time, then ran off in Lieutenant Sanada’s direction.

This time, he headed onto the battlefield for real.



They spoke of the air defense command room, but I had no way of knowing

where that was, of course. Aside from returning to that room, with its outer and inner walls both gone, I had no other choice.

Come to think of it, why had that room's walls disappeared? From what Miss Sakurai and Tatsuya were saying, someone had set a barrier spell to block magic, so I thought it unlikely they'd been destroyed by magic. But the cuts in the wall were so clean that it seemed impossible without it.

Telling myself they'd never leave me behind but still a little uneasy, I returned to the room I was in before at a trot.

Ah...

"I apologize for making you wait."

Mother came to greet me. First, I apologized.

She may have needed to recover her strength, but we couldn't go there with her on a stretcher, so it was obvious they'd do something to wake her up.

I bowed my head in apology, not to avoid her being angry with me for leaving her behind due to a selfish decision and making her wait as a result but because I was truly sorry.

"You needn't apologize, Miyuki. Tatsuya was being selfish, and you went to bring him back, right?" answered Mother with a smile.

Oh... She was pretty angry...

"And where is Tatsuya? He doesn't seem to be here."

"Well, that is... My brother said he would work with the army to drive off the enemies."

"Your brother?" Mother frowned dubiously.

Maybe I shouldn't have said that, I thought reflexively, but I didn't consider correcting myself. Mother couldn't criticize me for it, either.

Instead, she heaved a sigh. "So selfish... The child really is defective."

Her words didn't only sound detached—she *was* detached.

Not resigned but forsaking.

I didn't have to ask who *the child* was.

Instead of righteous indignation, I felt a chill.

At how his own mother could be so frivolous toward her own child.

"Well, that's fine. He did fairly well earlier, so I'll let him do as he wishes... I'm sorry for the wait. Please show us there," said Mother to the soldier waiting there to guide us to the command room.

No, it wasn't just "fairly well."

I'm alive, Mother is alive, thanks to Tatsuya.

And yet I found myself unable to object to her evaluation.

The air defense command room was past five armored doors.

It had no windows—in fact, it had no walls facing the outside. The place was about the size of four school classrooms together. Inside was a small hall, consisting of about thirty operators sitting at three rows of consoles, with eight mezzanine-level rooms jutting out from the wall toward the big screen in the hall.

We were let into one of those rooms, which had glass panes in the front.

"I don't see any listening devices or surveillance cameras," Miss Sakurai told Mother; she'd been checking the room. "This looks like a viewing room for high-ranking officers and Ministry of Defense staff."

I don't know how she checked it, but we could trust her results. That meant we could discuss secret matters in this room.

"The glass in front isn't ordinary glass, either. They had the same kind at the MPD. It can display any images you like from what's being monitored in this command room," she continued, starting to manipulate the console while watching the monitor on the table.

"Mother, I have something I'd like you to tell me." Meanwhile, I decided to gather my courage and ask Mother about before. "Earlier, Brother said that I was the only one who felt important to him... When I asked him why he said 'felt important' rather than 'is important,' he told me to have you explain..."

Mother frowned as she listened to my question. “I see. He said that, did he?” she snapped, unamused. “I suppose it would be a good time to tell you.”

And now, here she had said the same thing as my brother. I sensed an important secret, and it set me on edge.

“But before that... Miyuki, I want you to stop calling him your brother out loud. Some things are necessary when others can hear, but when only the Yotsuba are present, you shouldn’t treat him as your brother.”

Mother’s tone wasn’t firm—she scolded me as if the truth were self-evident.

“After all, you’ll follow in Maya’s footsteps to become the head of the Yotsuba. If people see you having an attachment to him, being dependent on such a flawed brother, it could be a big disadvantage for you.”

“How can you say that...?!” I unintentionally forgot about any reservation and lashed out at her. I’d been tense, listening in earnest, which made it all the more difficult for me to let even her words slip past. “How can you call your own son ‘flawed’?!”

“I regret it as well, but it’s the truth, so I can do no more.”

“That isn’t true! His strength saved me!”

“You mean before? Yes, I should expect him to do at least that much... That’s all the child can do, after all.” Mother answered my determined argument in a more apathetic voice than I thought I’d ever heard from her. Her tone revealed that she had utterly given up on him. “If Tatsuya said that I should talk to you about it, then I don’t mind. Where to start...?”

As Mother thought, the wall-sized window suddenly changed its picture. From the command room, with operators bustling about, to a bird’s-eye view of the ground. It showed Tatsuya, having just descended from the air.

I looked over at Miss Sakurai, who had probably put that up for us. She silently watched, observing Mother and me. It was clear, without needing to ask, that she had no intention of interrupting.

And it was clear that she knew many things I didn’t.

...Mother didn’t bother to look at the screen with my brother on it.

“Tatsuya was born as a defective magician.”

Mother wasn't looking at me, either.

“That isn't to say I feel no responsibility for being unable to give birth to him in a better way, but the fact is that Tatsuya possesses a flaw that makes him a failure as a magician.”

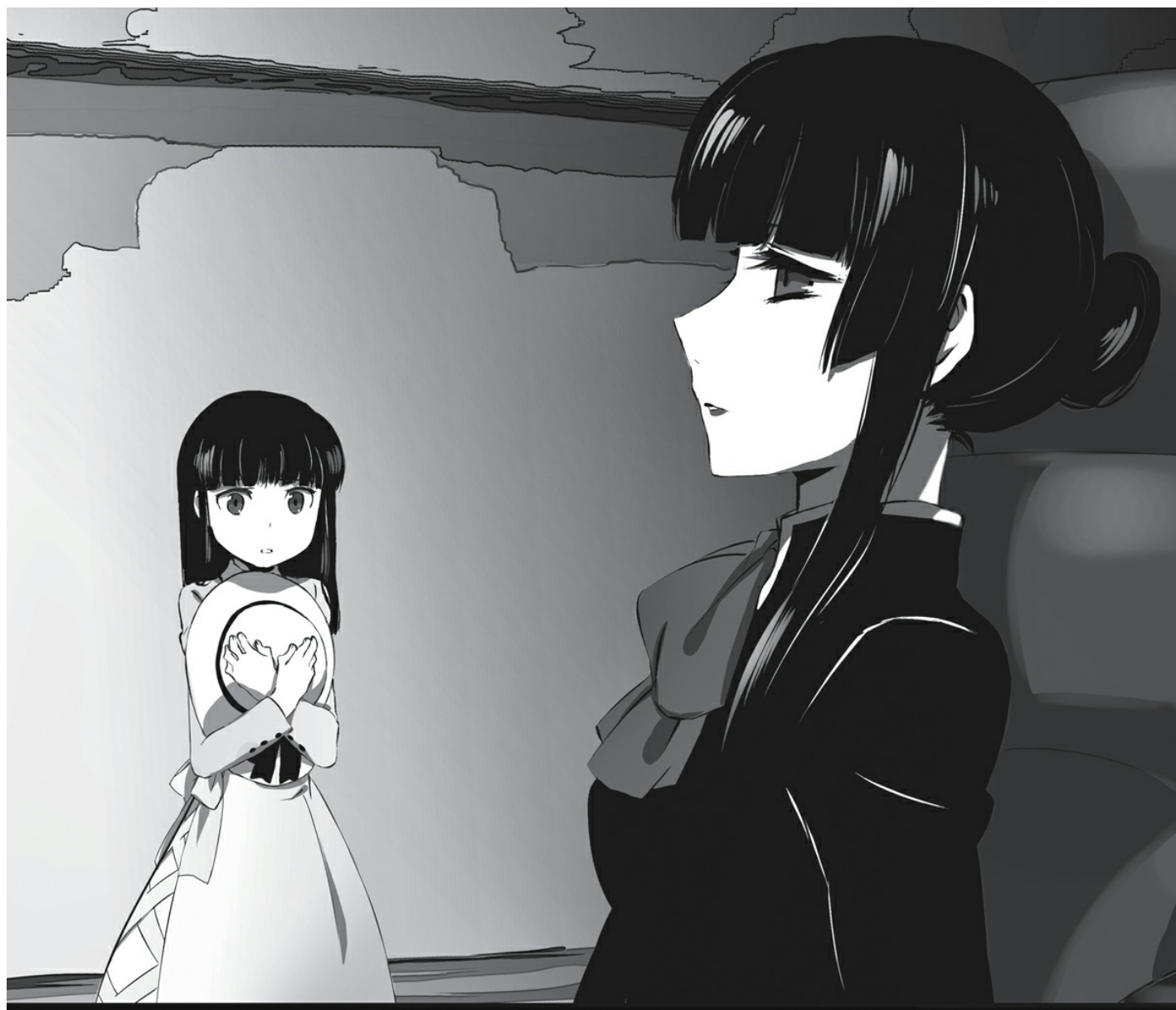
But that didn't mean she had closed her eyes.

“Tatsuya can only use the two types of magic that he was born with: dismantling eidos and reconstructing eidos. He seems to be able to work out a variety of skills with them, as long as it stays within those conditions, but no matter how hard he tries, those two things are all he can do. He cannot alter eidos—the fundamental characteristic of a magician.”

Mother's gaze conveyed nothing.

“Magic is a technique for altering information bodies. That's how events are altered. No matter how minute the change, altering one thing into another is the definition of magic. Tatsuya can't do that. He can only break those information bodies apart and remake them in a former state. That isn't the actual meaning of the word. He was born without the talent to truly use magic: changing information bodies into something else. If he isn't a defective magician, what is he?”

Mother was probably peering into her own heart...



“Well, his reconstructive abilities saved us, but strictly speaking, that power isn’t magic.”

I couldn’t find the words to argue.

But I did think this:

If that wasn’t magic, what should that power be called?

If it was worthy of a name other than magic, wouldn’t that make it no less than a miracle?

“But the Yotsuba are magicians and part of the Ten Master Clans. You can’t be a member of this family if you’re not a magician. The child can’t use magic, so he can’t be a member of the Yotsuba. That’s why we—Maya and I—performed a certain surgery on the child seven years ago. Of course, that wasn’t the only reason for the experiment, but...”

Experiment? Mother had *experimented* on him?

“The Artificial Magician Plan. A project to implant an artificial magic-calculation region into a non-magician who doesn’t have one, thus giving them the abilities of a magician.”

The Artificial Magician Plan. The name rang ominously in my ears.

“As a result of the mental modification surgery, Tatsuya experienced a loss of emotion.”

Mental modification surgery? Loss of emotion?

“Well, I suppose the term *impulse* is more fitting than *emotion*. Strong anger, deep sadness, fierce envy, enmity, hatred, voracious appetite, over-presence of libido, blind emotions of love. In exchange for losing, with one exception, those sorts of self-forgetting impulses, he gained the power to control magic.”

I can’t...

“But unfortunately, his artificial magic-calculation region’s capabilities were strikingly inferior to natural-born ones, and in the end, we couldn’t use him as anything more than a Guardian.”

I can’t believe it, I thought.

That can't be true, I thought.

“Mother...were you the one who did that surgery?”

Even thinking that, I couldn't help but ask the question.

On the big window, it showed Tatsuya, surrounded by adults bigger than he was, making contact with the enemy's landing forces.

“Who else but me could?”

I wanted her to deny it. But my wish wasn't granted.

I knew it was true.

The magic-calculation region wasn't an organ that resided in your brain—it was, so to speak, a function of your mind. To append an artificial magic-calculation region was to alter a person's mental makeup. And that was impossible, except with Mother's magic—her mental construction interference.

“...How could you...?”

“I've already explained why. Now, I'll answer the question you wanted the answer to.”

...Oh, I see...

I already knew.

I had realized it before.

Tatsuya wasn't the only one who had lost part of his emotions during the experiment.

Whether it was caused by a magical side effect or a sense of guilt or other mental activity, I didn't know, but...

For the first time, I was scared of magic.

I felt fear for the magic that could so cruelly change a person's heart.

On the screen, Tatsuya was pointing a CAD that looked just like a large handgun at the enemy soldiers. Where his gaze landed, the soldiers began to turn to dust, one after another.

“The only exception, the only thing he didn't lose... That is the answer.”

Please stop.

“The only impulse left within him is sibling love.”

Please, Mother, stop.

“The emotion to love his sister—you—and protect her.”

I don't want to hear any more.

“That’s the only real emotion he still has.”

But I would never be allowed to close my ears to this. I covered my mouth with my hands in an unconscious act. Maybe it was a conditioned reflex. I didn’t actually need to do it. But the shock was so severe that I couldn’t even cry out.

“Tatsuya knows himself very well,” she continued. “That’s what he meant by *feeling* that you are important to him. He only recognizes me as his mother; the natural love inherent in the concept doesn’t exist. The only thing his mind can consider precious is you, Miyuki. Even before, he saved me only because I was there. Or perhaps because he decided you would be sad if I had died.”

“Mother...did you choose this on purpose?”

I was the one asking, but it sounded like someone else was talking. It almost felt like a me who wasn’t me was moving my body and making me ask.

“Well, not exactly. He ended up having room for only one impulse because of his capacity problems, and I decided it should be love for you. After all, he’ll be with you longer than he’ll be with me.”

“Did you tell my br— Tell *him* that?”

“I explained it to him, of course. You know how he is—practical to a fault. He wouldn’t worry about something trivial like not having love for his parents.”

When she said that...

...I thought I saw just a hint of something.

Of a mother’s agony for being unable to love her child.

“Is there anything else you’d like to ask?”

“No... Thank you.”

Part of me felt like I shouldn't have asked. Another part felt like it was a good thing I had. A past too harsh to look at directly, a hard truth—but the present and future, which I couldn't turn away from.

On the screen, it showed Tatsuya, advancing at a fixed rate as though through an uninhabited wasteland. No bullets or artillery fire reached him.

A tank—or something like it—aiming its turret at him vanished, along with the operator inside.

He walked onward, pace unchanged.

But the soldiers accompanying him didn't have as easy a time. They hopped from cover to cover, firing guns and magic as they ran, so they wouldn't lag behind him.

Oh! One of the soldiers was shot. The battlefield shown through the aerial camera was almost like the events of a movie.

On the screen, at which I gazed without receiving that much of a shock, Tatsuya had the CAD he gripped in his left hand pointed at the soldier.

When did he do that? I had no time to wonder about it. A moment later, the soldier was running across the screen as though nothing had happened.

Enemy turrets erupted in flame.

They didn't hit Tatsuya.

He turned his right hand.

The enemy vanished, almost like special effects in a movie.

An allied soldier fell.

He turned his left hand.

With just that, the fallen soldier rose as though nothing had happened.

Even for me, someone more deeply intimate with the concept of magic than others, even many magicians, the image displayed on the screen felt unreal, like a film.

But that was the irrepressible impression of an onlooker.

For the soldiers fighting alongside my brother, he was an unanticipated stroke of fortune. The battle was like something out of a dream, where if they were injured, even fatally, they would be healed right away.

And for the enemy forces facing him, he was an unexpected disaster. The battle was a nightmare, where enemies they thought they'd neutralized got back up, and they were vanishing without even leaving corpses behind.

Tatsuya, now a malevolent deity, strode through the battlefield.

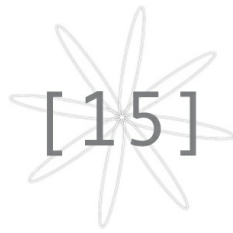
Simply to retaliate against them for shooting me.

Because that was his fate ever since seven years ago, when he was six years old.

How could I ever repay him?

What could I give him in return?

Because even my life was a gift from Tatsuya.



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Parlor

One week after parting at Tsushima Stronghold.

Tatsuya had left early the day of the battle, so he didn't know any more about how that battle had concluded than what had been made public. Meeting Kazama again here was a good opportunity to ask several questions, but it seemed that there was a lot even Kazama didn't know.

After exchanging information with him—though all the information Tatsuya could provide fell into the rumor category—they had been trading hypotheses back and forth when suddenly, he turned toward the door.

A chill crawled down Miyuki's spine. She knew from experience what that meant.

At last—

“Please excuse me.”

After a formal knock, the door opened without the person on the other side waiting for a response.

The senior butler bowed respectfully. Unlike the boy from before, he was a man in his early old age with a high position that could be discerned just from looking at him.

But he spoke no further—despite the fact that the simple job of opening a door shouldn't have been given to this old man.

But neither Tatsuya, nor Miyuki, nor Kazama thought it strange. In fact, they all thought the same thing: This old man was the only one who *could* carry out this task.

“I’m sorry for the wait.”

For behind him, the mistress of the residence spoke.

“I truly do apologize,” began Maya. “My last guests took considerable time to wrap things up... We went beyond the scheduled time, but I couldn’t very well chase them away...”

“Please don’t worry about it,” replied Kazama. “We’re aware that you’re quite busy.” The two of them eventually sat down.

“Miyuki, you may take a seat as well,” she prompted.

Miyuki did so slowly.

However, Maya didn’t speak to Tatsuya. He remained standing next to Miyuki as she sat on the sofa. It was a symmetrical, mirrorlike image, with the butler standing off to Maya’s side as well.

Three white porcelain teacups were placed in front of them. For Maya, Kazama, and Miyuki, of course. Maya gestured for them to drink the black tea, and after she herself took a sip, she began.

“I called you here today because there was something I wanted you to know about the string of military actions that began with the Yokohama Incident the other day.”

“Including me, ma’am?”

It was only natural Kazama would seem unsure about this. Maya was an outsider when it came to military and combat affairs, unlike him, a soldier. But she had a message for him, not questions.

“Yes, and Tatsuya and Miyuki as well,” said Maya, giving a meaningful smile. Though she said “as well,” it was clear from her expression that Tatsuya and Miyuki were the ones she really wanted to tell. “The International Magic Association has come to the conclusion that the explosion resulting in Chinhae Naval Port one week ago was not due to a radioactive contaminant weapon as

defined by the charter.”

Radioactive contaminant weapons polluted the earth’s environment through radioactivity from their residual materials. The term was mainly used by the International Magic Association and individual participant countries’ associations, since they all had a goal of preventing usage of weapons that would cause residual radioactive pollution. The term referred to them as weapons, but it also covered magic that caused radioactive pollution as well. The term wasn’t very well-known outside of association circles, but as a magician—albeit a traditional one—Kazama naturally understood.

“With their decision, the motion for disciplinary measures proposed by the association has been rejected.”

Miyuki’s face tensed a great deal for a moment, then changed to a sigh of relief.

“I didn’t know a motion for disciplinary measures was in the picture,” admitted Kazama in a flat voice. Still, Miyuki was one thing; Kazama would have certainly arrived at such a possibility. Nobody mentioned that.

“You’re quite calm about it, aren’t you? You seem as though you were confident they wouldn’t dispatch a disciplinary unit,” suggested Maya instead, going for directness this time.

Magicians were national treasures, national weapons, and national property. Even civilian magicians weren’t allowed to act against the state’s interests. Because of that, in a global sense, magicians’ human rights were limited more severely than those of non-magicians.

Because of this, the International Magic Association didn’t keep its own fighting force. Not enough magicians belonged to the association to constitute one.

In exchange, however, it was able to organize a multinational team to serve as an active unit by calling on the support of its member nations. If they had put together a disciplinary unit in response to this mysterious super-explosion, the nations who stood to benefit from Japan losing national power would have all sent in strong magicians. For Kazama, someone related to military affairs, this would have been a vital concern.

“We knew they wouldn’t detect any radioactive residue, after all,” replied Kazama. He didn’t say, *as I’m sure you knew as well*. It wasn’t necessary to do so, and he knew full well that if he had, she would have brushed it off.

As expected, Maya simply changed the topic. “Moving on. Did you know that they witnessed the death of the Quaking Sky General, who was with the destroyed enemy fleet?”

“Yunde Liu is dead?” asked Kazama, his poker face dissolving at the news from Maya. His repeat of the question wasn’t an act. His eyes had gone wide.

“Yes,” said Maya. “One of the thirteen strategic magicians, made internationally public by their respective governments, Yunde Liu, has died. Of course, the Great Asian Alliance seems to have placed very tight information restrictions on this.” She smiled. “Strategic magicians have virtually no privacy, after all.”

An individual strategic magician had enough power to rival strategic weaponry, so as she said, they were objects of interest for major world powers. More importantly, for the magicians from those powers. In the current world, magic had to be fought with magicians, as long as you didn’t use some gimmick like antinite. Stopping strategic ones was an important mission for any magician involved in the military.

Major world powers had publicized a total of thirteen strategic magicians to elevate their national prestige. These magicians were also known as the Thirteen Apostles, and the only success case where the nation was able to conceal one’s actions was the USNA’s Angie Sirius.

Japan, of course, was no exception. Espionage activities probing the Thirteen Apostles’ actions had only revealed her name—more accurately, her nickname and code name—and the fact that the person was a minor. Nothing about their identity was certain. All information gathering in this vein was the field of the Ten Master Clans, who put significant efforts into it.

“This would mean the Thirteen Apostles have become the Twelve Apostles.” In just a few simple words, Maya summarized the cause of a major change in the international balance of military power.

And then she offered another piece of secret information Kazama didn’t

know.

“It looks like our government is using the opportunity to draw out the Great Asian Alliance for major negotiations,” she explained. “The chief of staff has requested the Itsuwa family mobilize, and they accepted. Mio is accompanying the fleet they organized at Sasebo.”

“She’s boarded a warship?” said Miyuki despite herself, having kept to the role of listening, knowing her position in this situation.

“Yes.” Maya didn’t criticize her, though. In other words, this news was surprising enough that it wasn’t strange that she should forget herself.

Mio Itsuwa was the only strategic magician in Japan that its government had made public—in other words, one of the Thirteen Apostles. As far as confirmed intelligence went, she was the only person aside from Tatsuya in Japan who could use strategic magic. In other words, she was the military’s trump card.

Her Abyss spell could depress the water’s surface into a hemispherical shape that could cover anywhere from a few dozen yards to several miles in radius. It was classified as fluid control magic, a subset of the movement magic type. Any ships on the surface caught in her spell’s area would slide down the steep slope of the water, or simply fall, or capsize, or find a watery grave in the giant waves caused by the water’s surface returning to normal upon the spell’s end. An Abyss of one mile could create a hemispherical surface as deep as one mile, easily engulfing any submarines under the surface as well.

This ability, which could theoretically destroy entire fleets in a single attack, was designated strategic magic. However, by targeting underground water sources to cast Abyss, she could also use it to demolish groups of buildings on hard surfaces as well.

“...But won’t it be a strain on her body?” asked Miyuki worriedly.

“I’m sure they considered that when they decided—both the staff and the Itsuwa family,” answered Maya, seeming unconcerned. “They must believe this opportunity is worth it.”

In contrast to her immense magical ability, Mio Itsuwa was quite frail physically.

It apparently hadn't been as bad for her in her mid-teens, but she'd been using a powered wheelchair ever since she was about twenty. It wasn't any leg disorder that prevented her from walking but a measure to keep as little of her stamina from being depleted as possible. Rumor went that after graduating university, she almost never left the Itsuwa family residence.

Currently, the Itsuwa were one of the families in the Ten Master Clans, but much of their position was due to having a strategic magician in Mio. Although it wouldn't be relatively far from where she lived, being on a combat vessel for several days was, in a way, a gamble.

"Just as we had information on Yunde Liu, they probably know that Mio has gone to the front. Also, this is unconfirmed information, but we have word that Dr. Bezobrazov has entered Vladivostok."

Kazama's expression changed again upon hearing the name. "...You mean the Igniter, Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov?"

"Yes, the very same. Having seen the results of the battle at the southern end of the Korean Peninsula, the world's top military experts seem to be reassessing the effectiveness of large-scale magic."

He hadn't accidentally said anything, but Tatsuya was surprised at this as well.

Igor Andreivich Bezobrazov was a researcher at the Soviet Science Academy, but at the same time, he was a strategic magician commanded by the New Soviet Union. He wasn't a concealed strategic magician like Tatsuya; he, like Mio, was one of the Thirteen Apostles, the nationally publicized strategic magicians. His strategic magic, Tuman Bomba, was a step behind Angie Sirius and the USNA's Heavy Metal Burst in terms of power, but the scope of its destruction was said to be greatest among the Thirteen.

Until now, none of the nations had mobilized the strategic magicians for actual combat, using them only as shows of strength. But this meant the recent battle had caused four strategic magicians, including Tatsuya, to mobilize.

"The Great Asian Alliance probably has the same information..."

"Do you mean peace is likely in the coming days?"

"Yes, that is my humble prediction," said Maya, looking at Kazama with a

smile. For someone in her midforties, her smile possessed a youthful disarming side paired with a mature seductiveness. She often looked less than thirty.

Such allure would never work with Kazama, however. He silently waited for her next words.

“...This will wrap up our fate that started three years ago.” One probably couldn’t entirely call it Tatsuya’s illusion that, as Maya picked up where she left off, her face seemed to color with a slight dissatisfaction, as though she’d missed her mark. “However, several countries are now paying attention to us because of the Chinhae Naval Port’s destruction. More than a couple of them seem to have guessed the attack was a strategic spell and will begin to search for the caster’s identity. Several groups will probably realize the commonalities between the GAA’s dispatched fleet being wiped out and the Battle of Okinawa and use that as a clue. However, if Tatsuya’s identity were revealed, well...it would be an incredibly undesirable situation for me.”

“I understand all too well,” nodded Kazama.

Maya naturally—so naturally you couldn’t tell it was an act—softened her expression. Actually, maybe she really did smile out of genuine contentment. “I’m glad you understand. Just to be sure, however, I’d like you to refrain from contacting Tatsuya for a while.”

Negotiations with Kazama ended in a satisfying manner for Maya and, in turn, the Yotsuba. Saying she had him wrapped around her finger would be an overstatement, but the promise not to use Tatsuya in future combat against the Great Asian Alliance had doubtlessly been made at Maya’s own pace.

Of course, whether he planned on upholding this verbal promise, and whether she believed it on all fronts, was something worthy of a question mark in parentheses.

And now, Maya and Tatsuya had met each other in the parlor. Kazama, of course, left after their business was finished—he was a busy man himself—but Maya had firmly instructed even Miyuki to leave them.

And despite even making her own attendants exit the room, Maya was taking her sweet time beginning the conversation.

Eventually, as Maya gazed down at her empty cup of tea, seemingly dissatisfied, Tatsuya silently sat across from her. Silently—and not asking for her permission first. As he rested his back against his seat and waited for her to speak, his face was a far cry from tension, awe, or dread.

Maya took a look at him, then returned her cup to its saucer. “It’s been three years since we’ve sat down with each other like this.”

Her voice and expression showed no signs of censure toward his insolence.

“This is the first time you’ve spoken to me like this, Aunt.”

“Is that right?”

Instead of respectfulness, the air around Tatsuya was cynical—as always, in a way. In contrast, Maya’s tone had become much more casual compared to before.

“Come to think of it,” she said, “this is the first time we’ve had a private conversation, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Still, the adjective *affectionate* wouldn’t have applied. The light in their eyes was too strong for that.

“What did you have to talk about?”

“Don’t be in such a hurry. Would you like some tea?”

“Won’t your cronies make a fuss if you were to make tea and bring it out yourself?”

Maya burst out into a chuckle at Tatsuya’s candid remark. “Honesty isn’t always a virtue, you know.”

“And words of consideration for others often hurt to hear.”

A swift, responsive counterattack.

Maya didn’t seem angered by it—in fact, she nodded, impressed. “It is nice to talk to someone with no restraint from time to time.”

“Have I somehow displeased you?”

“We’re aunt and nephew. You don’t need to worry about it,” she said, her tone making it difficult to know whether she meant it honestly or deceptively. She moved a hand to the summoning bell on the table.

The room’s walls and doors weren’t thin enough to let the soft chime of a handbell escape.

Nevertheless, there was a knock at the door before a scant minute had passed. They must have been monitoring the room through some other method, but Tatsuya wasn’t about to stand up in a fluster.

“Did you call, my lady?”

The butler in his early old age appeared. He saw Tatsuya sitting comfortably across from his mistress, but he didn’t bat an eye.

“Hayama, could you get me some more tea? And bring some of the same for Tatsuya as well.”

“Of course, my lady.”

If it were someone like Aoki, they would have gone red in the face and shouted at Tatsuya, forgetting they were in front of Maya. But if she trusted him to eavesdrop on his mistress’s conversation, no matter what the reason or form it took, he would never do something so petty. Tatsuya wasn’t flustered because he’d predicted that beforehand.

Of course, he also decided it would be pointless to make himself presentable anyway. Anyone with a bit of insight would have realized Tatsuya was not a submissive soul.

While they waited for their tea, Maya didn’t open her mouth. Tatsuya didn’t try to hurry her up, either. When she asked if he’d like tea, she meant it for their conversation. He wasn’t dull enough not to understand something that simple, and he wasn’t childish enough not to be able to wait that long.

Once she had the cup Hayama brought at her lips, she finally seemed to want to talk.

“You did quite a bit this time, Tatsuya.”

Almost nobody would have interpreted her tone or words at face value.

“It wasn’t much.”

Nor did Tatsuya think she was praising him.

“But for the Yotsuba, you did something troubling.”

“I apologize.”

His aunt sighed theatrically and made her complaint as expected, and Tatsuya made a formal apology. He hadn’t a scrap of intention to grovel or press his forehead to the table, though.

“...Well, I know you were just following orders. I had wanted to question Major Kazama over whether they needed to go that far, but...there’s no point in worrying over what’s done.”

“I’m much obliged.”

That time, his apology had a bit of sincerity in it. Leaving aside whether it had been right or wrong, maybe even Tatsuya thought he went slightly too far. Of course, it would have been an understatement to call the unprecedented destruction *massively* overdoing it, let alone *slightly*.

“The issue is what happens now,” said Maya.

“Has some concrete trouble come up?”

Maya didn’t immediately answer the question. She closed her eyes, took a sip of tea, and slowly looked up. She peered straight into Tatsuya’s eyes.

For Tatsuya’s part, he didn’t peer back—he put his teacup to his mouth in the same way his aunt had.

“The Stars are moving.”

The words she let him hear while he wasn’t looking at her had enough punch to make him freeze for a moment.

“Does that mean America itself has begun an operation?”

At that point, Maya’s and Tatsuya’s gazes finally locked.

Their burdens were incomparable. Maya, shouldering the powerful organization of the Yotsuba, and Tatsuya, who needed to protect no one but his sister.

But the light in Tatsuya's eyes was in no way inferior to the pressure of Maya's gaze.

"Right now, the Stars have only started an independent investigation," she explained. "But they already know the explosion was caused by a spell that converted mass to energy. They've narrowed the caster's identity down very considerably—in fact, they've specifically marked you and Miyuki as individual suspects."

Tatsuya shook his head one and a half times at Maya's news.

"...That information-gathering ability is incredible."

"They don't call themselves the world's strongest magic unit for nothing."

"No, I was referencing your men, Aunt Maya."

He didn't get a reply back. Maya was silent, as though she'd been taken off guard.

Tatsuya didn't make a particularly amused face, instead opening his mouth to fill the silence. "The USNA's Stars call themselves the strongest magic unit in the world, and yet you've dug up their intelligence activity results almost in real time. Do you have spies in there?"

"...I can't say, unfortunately."

"No, of course not," said Tatsuya, nodding in false seriousness at the answer he'd managed to squeeze out of Maya.

Maya made a bitter expression for a moment but immediately covered it with a smile—just like her. "In any case, do be careful of your surroundings," she told him. "The Stars aren't like the people you've gone up against in the past. If they decide that you've dealt a blow to America's supremacy, they will come with real force to eliminate you."

"And if the possibility arises that the flames would jump to the Yotsuba, an assassin would be sent in separately. I'll keep that in mind."

The aunt and nephew stared at each other.

Not even a trace of a smile was on their faces anymore.

“If you understand that much, then this will be quick.”

“You had Miyuki leave the room because you thought I would arrive at the answer right here, didn’t you?”

Tatsuya’s tone had changed slightly.

His aunt didn’t answer the question. The answer was in her eyes as their gazes intersected again.

“Tatsuya, I want you to quit school.”

What she said was not an answer but an order.

“What would you have me do?” he asked.

“Stay here on your best behavior for a while. I’ll send a different Guardian for Miyuki.”

“I thought selecting a Guardian was the sole decision of the target under escort.”

“Every rule has its exceptions.”

“That is true, but...I must refuse.”

If someone else had been present, they would have shivered like the temperature in the room had suddenly plummeted. But it wasn’t a physical temperature change; it was from the heightened sense of tension in the air.

“If I were to suddenly leave school now,” he continued, “I would think it would be like telling the world I was the magician who destroyed the GAA fleet.”

“I can give any reason for it we need.”

“Can you?”

The expressions disappeared from their faces.

“Are you saying you won’t obey my orders?”

“Miyuki is the only one who can give me orders.”

The tension in the room reached its zenith.

Amid the nervous air, it was like time had stopped.

And then the world was covered in night.

Not in darkness.

A multitude of brilliantly shining stars, hovering in the dark.

The parlor's ceiling had changed to a moonless, starry night sky.

The stars moved, turning into rays of light...

...and the scent of blood floated through the room.

And a moment later,

without a sound,

the night filling the room shattered.

Nothing in the room had changed; aunt and nephew stared at each other.

But the sense of tension filling the space between them had dissolved along with the night's destruction.

"...You seem to have gone quite easy on me."

"Of course I did. You are my beloved nephew, after all," answered Maya with a smile.

Neither of them were wounded, and the scent of blood in the room was no longer there.

"Well, even bearing that in mind, you were excellent," she said. "I've decided to let you do as you please this time."

"Thank you," said Tatsuya, standing without a word and bowing slightly to her.

"It's fine," she answered, waving a hand. "It's just a little reward for having broken my spell."

Tatsuya left the parlor behind him. No voices came out to stop him.



After Tatsuya exited the parlor, Maya sank into her own thoughts for a short time. Eventually, she heaved a great sigh and rang the bell on the table.

"...You called, my lady?" asked the butler Hayama, immediately appearing.

“I’m changing spots. Please ready tea for the sunroom and lead Miyuki there,” instructed Maya.

“Of course, my lady.” Hayama bowed and deftly cleaned up the used teacups without meeting his mistress’s gaze.

Then, just as he was about to withdraw from the room and carry out Maya’s orders, she stopped him. “Wait a moment,” she instructed. “Hayama, isn’t there something you’d like to ask me?”

As his mistress looked at him, Hayama bowed respectfully. “I’m much obliged, my lady. If you’ll allow me to ask...”

Hayama was a prominent figure in the Yotsuba family, having served both the previous head and the current. He appeared to be in his early old age, but he was actually older than seventy.

There was an atmosphere about this mansion, where he was allowed to say things that others would be afraid to even suggest.

“Is it truly wise to leave Master Tatsuya to his own devices, my lady?”

And unlike the others here, Hayama had never made light of Tatsuya’s counterfeit status. His own magic capabilities were not at a very high level, but he’d seen many a magician over the years. His experience rated Tatsuya highly.

As a magician to be cautious around.

“It doesn’t matter. Oh, and I believe I understand quite well what you’re concerned over. And you’re right. He could betray the Yotsuba at any time.”

“...Much obliged, my lady.”

“And as I confirmed earlier, my magic does not mix well with his ability. If we fought for real, there is a high chance that I would lose.”

Maya’s spell was named Meteor Swarm in Japanese for its visual characteristics. Its English name, however, Meteor Line, more properly expressed its qualities.

This was the spell that had entrenched Maya as one of the strongest magicians in the entire world, had given her the nicknames Demon of the East and Queen of the Night. A form of convergence magic that biased the

distribution of light in its area of effect, it had especially high power in closed spaces like rooms and tunnels.

Visually, the spell's process went like this: First, it closed the target area in a darkness bubble speckled with countless tiny stars, and second, it converted those photospheres into a ray system that would pierce the target. Cosmetically, it appeared as though she were attacking with a shower of lasers, but there was no relationship whatsoever between Meteor Line's attack power and the light's own energy. Even the quantity of light didn't matter.

The essence of this spell was twofold. First, how remarkably forceful it was in biasing light distribution, and second, how it configured the light's coordinates as small orbs and thin lines.

It defined a space for the light to pass through. That, along with whatever objects constituted that space, was then altered into a light-permeable state. As a result, it didn't matter if the target was organic, inorganic, hard, soft, heat resistant, plastic, or elastic—it would bore holes through the target so that the light could pass through. Even highly transparent glass wasn't 100 percent transparent; even clear objects wouldn't be able to escape the event alteration. The spell would simply change them into a light-permeable state, which was the same as boring a hole in them.

If you looked at the logical side instead of the visual phenomenon, the spell interfered with the constructional information of the target via light distribution. Then it directly vaporized solids and fluids, regardless of their heat or pressure. In other words, one could call it a variety of dismantling magic, since it dismantled targets into a gaseous state. It defined the rays themselves as having biased light distribution, too, making it unblockable with reflection, refraction, or interception. Even if you surrounded yourself with a spherical shield, the spell would still create a line through which 100 percent of the light could pass, *regardless of the photons' movement*, and simply bore a hole in it.

Not only was magic that interfered with physical phenomena powerless to block Meteor Line, most anti-magic was as well. Area Interference was a purely spiritual defensive method; because Meteor Line traveled through a physical medium—light—it was incredibly difficult to stop the spell's activation with it. You had to have a power of influence toward the *single element*—the light's

distribution—that exceeded Maya’s, or you couldn’t stop it. Maya had possessed the ability to influence light distribution since birth, so it was simply too high a hurdle. And once it was activated, you couldn’t resist by using Area Interference there, either. The phenomenon—the overwriting with the skewed light distribution—would already be set there as a preestablished fact.

Neither anti-physical phenomenon defenses, nor anti-magic defenses, nor the Juumonji family’s Phalanx, which activated both at the same time, could stop it. That was why Maya was regarded as an invincible in magician battle and one of the strongest magicians in the world.

However...because Meteor Line interfered *indirectly* with the constructional information of the limited space, which included an object as a component part, it was a decisively bad matchup against Tatsuya’s spell, which *directly* interfered with constructional information. The direct interference against spatial construction would easily shatter the bounded field of night, which was built up through interfering with spatial construction via light.

“And I must say, there’s a considerable possibility he *will* kill me. But even if Tatsuya can betray the Yotsuba, Miyuki cannot. And Miyuki will never see the Yotsuba as an enemy.”

“However, Lady Miyuki would appear to be deeply dependent on Master Tatsuya. Should he wave the flag of rebellion against this family, I wouldn’t think she could go against his will,” Hayama noted with a grave frown on his brow.

However, there was no sign whatsoever of this counterpoint angering Maya. “It’ll be fine. You needn’t brainwash someone to influence their mind. I don’t have to explain that much to you, do I, Hayama?”

Maya’s abrupt smile was colored with pity.

“Miyuki can never escape the responsibility she’s been given. That was how my sister raised her. And Tatsuya could never do anything that would make Miyuki suffer.”

“...But to do that, my lady...”

“Yes. It’s a shame for the other children in the candidacy, but the next family

head will be Miyuki—lest we turn Tatsuya, that monster, into an enemy.”

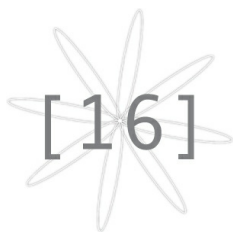
“We must have Lady Miyuki assume the role of family head at all costs, then.”

“There is no need to worry, Hayama. I have a plan to that end as well,” said Maya, her smile fully relaxed.

Hayama bowed deeply, showing the greatest respect, and this time left the parlor behind him.

For the general populace, AD 2095’s Yokohama Incident was a natural extension of AD 2092’s Battle of Okinawa and a plot to retaliate for their loss three years ago—or perhaps for their failed mission.

But it could also only be called historical irony that the series of military actions leading up to the Yokohama invasion operation should end in the same way the Battle of Okinawa had.



August 11, AD 2092

Okinawa

Battlefield

Tatsuya, along with the Onna paratrooper unit commanded by Kazama, had driven the invading force to the water’s edge.

Normally, that should have been expressed as “the Onna paratrooper unit, along with Tatsuya.”

But it was clear to both enemy and ally that the slight magicrafter, standing at the front of a mere platoon of infantry, body hidden by a full-face helmet and armored suit, was the one routing the invaders.

It was a slaughter—too one-sided to be called a battle.

But at the same time, it lacked the hatred to be called a butchery.

No blood flowed.

No flesh flew.

Not even the stench of burning flesh and blood, not even the explosions that tore limbs apart, were present here.

The battlefield was dominated by a strange silence.

Before the bullets, the hand grenades, the portable missiles the invaders fired reached the defending forces' battle line, they melted and vanished in midair. The same standard bullets, bombs, and missiles vanished as aggregates.

One invading soldier, still standing his ground, pulling his trigger, then another, then another—all blurred, distorted, and disappeared.

The defense soldiers following after Tatsuya had forgotten how to pull the trigger at this point, gazing intently at the surreal scene.

The intruders shared the same surreal feeling, despite one comrade after another disappearing into nothing.

There was a lack of bloodshed and mangled bodies to stimulate instinctual fear, so even as the invaders were being eaten away by an unknown sense of unease, they didn't readily surrender.

That was just what Tatsuya had hoped for.

If high-level magicrafters had accompanied the invasion force, it probably wouldn't have been this one-sided. While it was certainly a mistake on the invaders' part, it definitely could have proven to be a mistake on Japan's part, too, to have underestimated that possibility.

...But that wasn't a good enough reason for Tatsuya to pull his punches.

His mind was currently in a manic state.

He had lost any and all restraint toward destruction and slaughtering. It was as though he felt no aversion to murder. He broke and he killed, just the same as he walked.

Or rather—he erased.

It wasn't as though he didn't know agitation, either. It was only natural, but he was currently a long way from having a calm mind after the shock that'd hit him.

And the shock at seeing his sister almost get killed was deep.

His spell could instantly make any fatal wound, no matter what kind, as if it never happened. Today was the first time he'd used Regenerate on others, but he knew beforehand that both his own body and others' were equal objects that he could restore.

But even his Regenerate couldn't bring the dead back to life. The continuum of life and death was irreversible; death was an inherent change in life. If he used Regenerate on a corpse, it would create only a corpse without any wounds. The dead wouldn't come back. Tatsuya knew that as well.

Even if a person's heart stopped, or they went brain-dead, or were cut in the neck, he could revive them as long as it was immediately after. Even with insta-kill wounds, the possibility of reviving someone by reconstructing their flesh and circulating their blood wasn't zero, and as long as that was true, his Regenerate could call the dead back to life.

But once death had set in, he couldn't do anything.

If he hadn't been in time... That fear was enough to send him spiraling into panic. Tatsuya wasn't truly scared of other things, including his own death—more accurately, that emotion had been stolen from him. But being afraid of nothing else made the fear of losing Miyuki shake him deep and hard to the core. However calm he may have looked, its effects still had him reeling in agitation.

Because his other emotions didn't function, he calmly, efficiently, and abandoning all hesitation, delivered retribution.

It was, so to speak, a rational insanity.

A madness funneled into a single purpose.

With the enemy refusing to surrender, his madness greedily devoured their

lives.

The invading force's routed lines could only be described as being in a state of collapse, but that didn't mean their command structure had followed suit.

Their commander had already decided they couldn't hold the beachhead and ordered a withdrawal to the seas.

Invading soldiers, fighting tooth and nail to be the first to board the landing craft...

All to escape the hands of the raging god walking toward them, step by step.

All without realizing that was where the Reaper waited for them, scythe brandished.

Before the invading force, now busy escaping instead of counterattacking, Tatsuya stopped.

Then, as though they'd suddenly remembered their duty, the Onna paratroopers created a firing line.

But before the order to fire, a power came from Tatsuya that distorted the scene.

It wasn't as though there were no magicafterers who could release such strong interfering force that it would ripple to affect others' vision—in other words, to light waves.

The truly excellent magicafterers didn't use the kind of power that would disturb the world aside from intentional event alteration, but young and talented magicians who lacked the experience to match their power sometimes caused unintentional event alteration. But what had just happened here was a complete physical side effect.

A small assault landing ship, along with the troops it swallowed up inside, turned to dust and vanished. The view looked distorted because a part of the landing ship had become gas and dispersed, therefore forming a layer of vapor with different density than the air, which in turn had caused a light-refraction phenomenon.

All the soldiers fighting to flee onto the next ship stopped moving at once.

The sound of clapping water was, in fact, the sound of weapons being discarded into the sea.

The clapping on the water to the ground spread in a chain.

A white flag went up.

The GAA ship's naval flag rising at the same time communicated their plea for lawful treatment of prisoners.

Behind Tatsuya came the order to cease fire instead of the order to fire.

Tatsuya saw this and leveled his right hand at the white flag.

"Idiot! Stop!" came a voice as a hand reached to him from the side.

Tatsuya, meaning to evade it, lowered his arm and twisted his body.

But the right arm he thought he'd dodged clamped down on to his outstretched left hand.

"The enemy has no intention to keep fighting!"

He didn't need to be told that. He knew.

He couldn't see the man who stopped him under the full-face helmet, but he'd never heard that voice before.

At the very least, that wasn't Captain Kazama or Lieutenant Sanada.

Of course, even if Kazama had stopped him, Tatsuya had no wish to annihilate the enemy.

If they were trying to surrender, then he simply had to kill them all before it was set in stone, before they confirmed that they'd given up on further fighting.

Thankfully, there were still some enemies holding weapons.

"I told you to stop!"

But Tatsuya couldn't pull his CAD's trigger.

Suddenly, his vision spun, and he lost track of his Dismantle target position.

A strong impact to the back.

He realized he'd been punched.

Immediately, he began to stand, but then he understood the man was already holding him down.

“Any more than this would be butchery. I will not allow it.”

A pistol was up against his helmet, pointing at him.

“Calm down, Specialist. Yanagi, put your gun away.”

He remembered that voice. He had a memory of the term *specialist*, too. They’d given him that rank for convenience before sending him out, since they couldn’t send a civilian into real combat. The voice was none other than Captain Kazama’s.

“Specialist, remember the conditions we dispatched you with?”

And he remembered those, too, of course.

His seething head cooled a little.

His will to fight decreased, and it quelled his desire for destruction and slaughter.

“Yes, sir,” he answered, taking his finger off the CAD’s trigger. Yanagi released his hand and knee from him.



The landing force’s surrender spread relief through not only Kazama’s unit, which had personally disarmed them, but to another unit as well, which mobilized to intercept. However, though understandable on one hand, it was a little too hasty on the other.

“Message from HQ!”

A signalman ran to Kazama. He took his helmet off, revealing a pale, tense face.

“Ships thought to be a separate enemy force approaching Aguni Island from the north! Two high-speed cruisers and four destroyers! Allied forces won’t make it in time to intercept! Enemy fleet predicted to be in firing range in twenty minutes! We’ve received orders to immediately evacuate from the coast!”

Despite the energy in his words, he spoke them oddly in places, but the news was dire enough that he couldn't help it.

"Give me that radio," ordered Kazama, his voice calm in contrast.

"Yes, sir!"

The signalman's voice was louder than it needed to be.

The other members of the unit who were going about disarming the enemy gulped and stared at their captain. For Tatsuya, the fact that no enemy soldiers plotted to use the chance to escape was truly a shame. Or perhaps none of them resisted because he wasn't bothering to hide his murderous intent.

"This is Kazama. The torpedo boats—no attack planes to spare on the ships, either, sir? What shall we do with the captives? ...Understood, sir."

Kazama brought the radio away from his face and took a breath.

"In approximately twenty minutes, this position will be within effective firing range of enemy ship cannons! All hands, bring the captives and retreat inland!"

Tatsuya doubted his ears.

How were they supposed to escape far in twenty minutes without cars to move and with more captives than allies?

When Kazama took off his helmet, Tatsuya couldn't see any bitterness or distress in his face. The commander's firm solemnity had created an iron mask.

But he didn't need telepathy to see it was clear he didn't think highly of his orders to bring the captives.

"Specialist, you return to the base first."

His voice as he gave the short command was especially impassive, backing up Tatsuya's guess.

At least, that's what Tatsuya thought.

He said "return," but he meant "run away."

"Do you know the exact location of the enemy cruisers, sir?"

Instead of agreeing to the order, he kept his helmet on and asked.

“We do, but... Sanada!”

Kazama didn't ask why.

Instead, he called his subordinate, who was carrying a tactical information terminal.

“I've linked it to our ocean radar. Should I send it to the specialist's visor, sir?”

“Before that...” interrupted Tatsuya before Kazama could reply. “Did you bring the armament device you gave me yesterday—the one with the range-extension spell preinstalled?”

Sanada lifted his visor and exchanged glances with Kazama.

Kazama nodded, and Sanada looked back to Tatsuya.

“Not here, but it's still on the helicopter, so we'd only need five minutes for it to—”

“Can you have them bring it here right away, sir?”

Before Sanada could say *arrive*, Tatsuya made his request with the haste of a boy.

Then Tatsuya looked at Kazama, pulling the wired communication line in the helmet hiding his face and offering it to him.

Kazama frowned but said nothing. He put his helmet back on, then pulled his own cord out and clicked it into the connector terminal.

“There's a way to destroy the enemy fleet.”

Their secret conversation, held in front of the watchful eyes of the subordinates, began with an unbelievable bombshell.

“But I don't want the unit to see me do it. Could you get Lieutenant Sanada to leave the device here and move away, sir?”

Kazama couldn't see the look on Tatsuya's face.

The timbre of his voice didn't come over well on the wired connection, either.

The only thing he could use to make his decision was the words he used and his nature, which he'd learned from their short time together.

“...All right. But Sanada and I will stay here.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Tatsuya wondered what the retreating unit would do for a commander, but he changed his mind right away—that wasn’t something for him to think about.

As Kazama issued the retreat order and gave command to an officer named Yanagi—the one who had knocked him down before—Tatsuya simply waited for the armament device to arrive.



The sight of the interception unit’s hurried retreat could be seen on the air defense command room monitor as well.

And of course, by Miyuki and her mother, who had the image up on the entire window, too.

As the unit began to move, captives in tow, the three didn’t show any signs of moving from that place.

There was a stir in the command room. They heard an angry yell of “Who is that idiot?!” even from across the glass.

Miyuki looked at the image and gulped.

Because it was one of their family—her older brother.

She didn’t need to ask his name to know. She didn’t have to look at his identification signal to know. Even with his face behind a smoke visor, she would never mistake him given his stature alone.

An operator was repeatedly calling into a radio for a retreat. A male commissioned officer with a major rank badge was pleading in desperation with a base—probably the Kyushu one—for reinforcements.

Just by seeing the side of Miyuki’s face as she clenched her teeth, Sakurai knew exactly what she wanted to do, what she wanted to say.

It struck her as sad.

She wasn’t even twelve, but she couldn’t say what she wanted. She couldn’t even say the natural, human thing, that selfish request—to ask to go help her

brother.

Sakurai didn't know why Tatsuya had remained there.

But she could guess.

He probably had a means of doing something about the approaching enemy fleet.

Normally, this would be impossible, but for a magicrafter who was a direct descendant of the Yotsuba, which showed prominent capacity in specific fields, it wasn't unthinkable.

Even if he couldn't use normal magic, he had shown that he could use an absurd spell to repair someone's entire body—though according to Miyuki, it wasn't magic. And he'd done it on none other than Sakurai herself.

But it was also the unmistakable truth that as a magicrafter, he possessed only low abilities. He couldn't use defensive barriers, unlike a combat magicrafter with even average skills.

Earlier, all he had done was nullify the enemy's attacks with the feat that seemed to be at odds with human limits of identifying all the bullets and artillery fire and erasing it, whether individually or as a group. She didn't know how he'd done that, and she thought it was amazing in its own right, but if Tatsuya was trying to use a spell to neutralize an enemy fleet from a point some eight miles away—and if that were possible, it would be equivalent to strategic magic—he wouldn't be able to defend himself like he did before.

"My lady, I have a request."

When she understood that, the words slipped off her lips before she even realized it herself.

"What is it?"

Despite the suddenness, Miya's voice hadn't a single bit of unnaturalness.

She almost sounded like she already knew what Sakurai was going to ask her.

"I'd like to go out to meet Tatsuya."

Miyuki, whose eyes had been glued to the screen, turned around in a flurry.

The eyes with which she looked at Sakurai were opened wide.

“Do you mean you’d like to go there right now?”

Still, no surprise in Miya’s voice.

Her personal magic was supposed to be mental interference, not mind reading.

Could my lady also want to...? she conveniently began to think, before shaking the thought from her mind.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Honami, I seem to recall you’re my bodyguard.”

And you’d like to leave my side? she asked between the lines.

It was a natural question for Miya and one that Sakurai couldn’t answer.

“...I’m s—”

“Well, all right, then.”

Before the word *sorry* could make it out of Sakurai’s mouth—an apology that could have been interpreted either way—Miya nodded generously.

“This very base might be in danger as well if we leave the enemy fleet alone. If Tatsuya is going to do what I think he will, then I’d like you to go help him.”

“What you think he will?”

The question had been reflexive.

Miya seemed to know what Tatsuya was trying to do. Thinking about it again, maybe that was only natural, because she was his mother.

“He only understands that it’s theoretically possible; I don’t believe he’s ever actually tried it. But he must have an idea about that. He is very quick-witted, that child.”

She spoke as though she couldn’t care less.

But Sakurai still felt like she was a mother proud of her son.

“Thank you, my lady.”

Hoping that was truly the case, Sakurai politely bowed in gratitude.



In the previous great war that spanned twenty years, the main weapons on warships had changed from onboard missiles to Fleming launchers. (At the time, they were called by the name rail guns, but when they were made larger, their name was changed.)

Current ship artillery was in the style of continuous fire from Fleming launchers. Since their rapid fire was overwhelmingly superior to gunpowder cannons, and there was no need to carry large weights of propellant fluid and machines, they could make the explosive-style loaded missiles larger. However, their firing range was no different from gunpowder cannons and might have even been less. That was because Fleming launchers placed importance on rapid fire, and extending one's firing range while maintaining that rapidity had adverse effects because of recoil on the ship that couldn't be ignored.

Top-of-the-line warships' anti-ground attack power was said to be over ten times that of one hundred years ago. If one made it into a Fleming launcher's effective range, even a single ship could turn a town into a sea of flames.

And it wasn't good against only cities. The launchers' rapid-fire capabilities were effective against encampment raids, too. If soaked in the concentrated artillery fire from two cruisers, a subpar magicrafter would be helpless.

Tatsuya, too, knew that this was a battle against time. He pulled the magazine from the large sniper rifle loaded with a specialized CAD—the armament device with a range-extension spell equipped—that had arrived, and further, he took the bullets out from inside it.

He held the bullets in both hands in turn, forming a prayerlike pose, and again fit the magazine back in.

Kazama and the others who were watching had no clue what he was doing. All they could sense—and barely—was that he was using a powerful spell, but they couldn't even speculate as to what kind of spell was at work.

Probably, even if it wasn't Kazama and the others, no one would have known. If there was a magicrafter who could tell what Tatsuya was doing now without advance knowledge, that would be even more extraordinary.

What Tatsuya was doing was the work of dismantling the bullets temporarily into atoms and then reassembling them back to normal.

It took two minutes before he finished reloading all five bullets.

“Approximately ten minutes until enemy fleet enters effective firing range.”

Sanada announced their remaining time to Tatsuya, who had finished preparing the device.

“The enemy fleet is cruising at nineteen miles due west... Will it reach?”

“I’ll just have to try.”

Tatsuya answered as such to Sanada’s question and brought the armament device up to an elevation of forty-five degrees.

Taking no account for the wind’s effects, just aiming as far as he could.

In that posture, he expanded a magic program.

A pipe-shaped virtual area was expanded in front of the muzzle. It was a magic that accelerated the speed of objects passing through it.

Despite the virtual region’s creation taking some time, Sanada ended up nodding, satisfied with the constructed region’s size.

The longer the virtual region that held the accelerating effects, the more range extension it offered. At this length, it could perhaps reach nineteen miles.

But the spell Tatsuya was expanding didn’t end there.

In front of that object-accelerating magic region, a second virtual region appeared.

“What...?!”

The object-accelerating virtual region had three processes.

It would pull down the apparent inertial mass of an object penetrating the region.

It would pull up its speed.

It would return its apparent inertial mass to normal.

The magnification of this inertial mass and manipulation of speed were

variables the magicrafter would input.

The properties of the virtual region Tatsuya added now were basically the same. However, the magnification of inertial mass control was designated positive, the speed magnification kept the same, and the inertial mass restoration canceled.

In other words, the virtual region Tatsuya had added was an arrangement of the virtual region spell for accelerating, which Sanada had designed, into a similar spell for maximizing inertial mass.

He had accomplished this through improvisation.

“This kid does some unbelievable stuff...”

Sanada’s mutter was drowned out by the sound of the sniper rifle firing.

Tatsuya gazed out at the open sea, as if following with his eyes the supersonic bullet he couldn’t have seen.

Finally, he shook his head in disappointment.

“...No good, sir. It reached only twelve miles.”

How had he followed the bullet’s path?

It was a detached tone of voice, but he was probably still disappointed. Maybe he felt himself worthless.

“The only thing I can do is wait until their fleet gets within twelve miles.”

Hearing that remark, the color of Sanada’s face changed.

“But then we’ll be in their firing range, too!”

The effective range of the Fleming launchers on board the cruisers was nine to twelve miles. It was restricted by the recoil allowed by the ship—in other words, the ship’s shape and size—so you could fairly accurately predict it from the ship type, regardless of manufacturer differences.

Getting inside twelve miles meant being in firing range.

“I know, sir. You two should go back to the base. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Don’t be a fool! You’re coming back with us.”

This was both the beachhead the enemy chose and the last place they'd fought the enemy.

It would almost certainly be where the enemy attacked next.

It would be one thing if he could strike from beyond their enemy ships' firing range, but if it came down to a shoot-out, his chances of survival were grim.

"But if I don't destroy their ships, the base will be in danger."

And his family likewise.

"Then, we should at least move away from here."

The two were smart enough to know what he was so hung up over—what he was trying to protect.

"We can't. There's no time to look for another firing location."

And so Sanada's proposal was rejected for a reason he was already well aware of.

"Can't we stand in for you?" Kazama, who had been silently listening to them talk, asked Tatsuya in a low voice.

"No, sir."

What came back in return was the expected answer.

"Then, we're staying here, too."

That, however, was the unexpected answer.

For Tatsuya, Kazama's immediate response was unbelievable.

"...If I fail, you two will go down with me."

"There is no strategy with a hundred percent success rate and no battlefields without danger of losing your life. If strategists are constantly straddling victory and defeat, soldiers are always fighting between life and death," finished the captain, with no boastfulness at all.

That famous line, understood from one section of the Hagakure, was powerful enough that Tatsuya gave up hope of persuading them otherwise.

A column of water rose in the open sea.

The enemy's test firing for its naval bombardment.

Neither Tatsuya, nor Kazama, nor Sanada spoke any longer.

Tatsuya saw the enemy's precise position displayed on his visor.

The wind direction, wind speed, and other specifications that would impact the shot were listed off in a stream of numbers.

Tatsuya brought the armament device up.

A projectile shot—an angling that prioritized distance above all else, relying on coincidence to hit.

Considering the bullet's flight time and falling arc, the enemy was already within range.

Tatsuya activated the virtual region spells, then pulled the trigger four times in succession.

Each time he did, he nudged the barrel one way or another, compensating for the effects of the wind on his aim.

The projectile shots had no real aim to begin with, of course. Even with luck on his side, he'd do no better than landing one somewhere vaguely near the enemy ships—and he didn't mind that from the start.

Tatsuya followed the motion of the four bullets in his head.

To be more precise, he followed the bullets' data, which he could see in the information dimension, via his conscious and unconscious brain regions.

By his hand, by his one-of-a-kind spell, he had dismantled and reassembled the bullets earlier.

However far away their constructional information got, he would never lose sight of them.

And then he saw the information of one of those four shots land right in the middle of the enemy fleet.

Tatsuya had his hands full simply following where the bullet went. Kazama and Sanada stood back in order to leave him undisturbed as he attempted whatever large-scale magic it was.

And so, when the thing they'd predicted—and that nature had predicted—had come, they had no choice other than to deal with it using with their own magic.

The enemy had already finished its test shots.

Next to come would be trajectory-corrected artillery fire.

The explosive shells fired, their path lower than Tatsuya's shots, and closed in on them faster than Tatsuya's bullet reached.

Kazama, a practitioner of old magic, didn't have very high interference power against physical objects. In fact, it was low.

Sanada was a magic engineer at heart, not a magician, so even with his high anti-object interference abilities, he couldn't keep up on the speed front.

At this rate, they'd hit a wall before Tatsuya shot down the enemy fleet—

“Moving in to support!”

A figure on a motorcycle split through the rain and torrent of explosive fire.

No sooner had the rider, clad in a woman's armored suit, jumped off the bike than she shouted that and unleashed a wave of psionic light.

When Tatsuya, who had been focusing his mind on the spell to annihilate the enemy fleet, heard her voice, he felt, in a corner of his mind, surprise and relief.

The surprise was because Sakurai had left his mother's side.

The relief was because under her protection, he could concentrate fully on his spell.

The Sakura series of engineered magicians: Their special trait was strong anti-physical and heat-resistant defensive magic.

They couldn't use technical spells as high level as the legendary Phalanx of the Juumonji, but the pure defensive ability of each of their anti-object and anti-heat spells ranked them as top-class magicians in all of Japan.

And ever since she was a child, Honami Sakurai had exhibited excellent abilities that were even a cut above the rest.

That was why she'd been chosen as the bodyguard for a valuable magician—

that magician being the only user of mental construction interference magic.

The artillery shells, on their direct course, were beaten down into the water.

The fire stopped reaching land.

One after another, she activated spells to offset their momentum, each hundreds of miles in front of her.

As he watched her with his physical eyes, with his mind's eye Tatsuya noticed one bullet reach a spot directly above the enemy fleet.

He held out his right hand, pointed his index finger west, then flipped his hand open.

The bullet dissolved into energy.



The mass-dismantling spell Material Burst had just been used for the first time in actual combat.

There was a flash over the horizon.

The clouds covering the sky lit up with reflected white light.

Although sunset was a distant prospect, the western horizon glittered brilliantly.

An explosion rumbled. Nobody here could mistake it for a distant clap of thunder.

It was the sound of all the fuel and gunpowder bursting at once, without any secondary explosions.

The artillery fire ceased.

An eerie rumble came to them.

“Tsunami! Retreat!” yelled Kazama, hastily picking up Sakurai—who had suddenly fallen to the ground, limp—and running. Sanada got onto the motorcycle and brought it next to Kazama, who ran as though he were flying.

Tatsuya had gotten into the tandem seat.

Kazama jumped, Sakurai in his arms.

With an acrobatic nimbleness, he landed standing on the handlebars—though it was more than simple acrobatics.

Taking full advantage of the military motorcycle’s great horsepower, they dashed off at a quick pace, despite clearly having the weight of too many people on it.

The storm that had brewed beyond the horizon settled, and as Tatsuya watched the wave die down and pull away, he kneeled down upon the hill they’d come to.

In front of him was Sakurai, who was lying there, limp.

His face, with his helmet removed, was covered in unadulterated sadness.

“...It’s okay, Tatsuya. This is only my life span.”

Tortured by the powerlessness of a life he couldn't save rapidly extinguishing its light before him, Tatsuya agonized, despite supposedly having lost his emotions. Sakurai gave him an unenergetic but pure smile.

"It isn't your fault. We never knew when my engineered body would reach its limit."

Tatsuya wanted to tell her that she was wrong.

Compared to normal people, an engineered magician's life span was unstable, but she was clearly enfeebled by the burden of using so many big spells in a short period of time. The burden of completely preventing a full artillery volley from a fleet of ships was too great even for the Sakura series.

But Sakurai didn't want him to say that.

So he gritted his teeth.

"It really isn't your fault. My role since birth was to be a shield, and today, I've carried out my duty to the end."

But Sakurai seemed to know exactly what Tatsuya was thinking.

"And I didn't do it because someone ordered me to. I did it because I wanted to."

Tatsuya tried to use Regenerate but quickly realized it wouldn't work.

He could rewind time for matter, but with his strength, it was impossible to reverse her life's clock.

"Could you please stop?" whispered Sakurai with a smile, as though she'd misunderstood that, her voice coaxing. "I've never had any freedom to live how I wanted until now. And now, I got to choose where I'd die. I won't let this chance escape. I don't have to die as a tool created by man—I can die as a human being."

Tatsuya had never even dreamed she'd had such darkness in her mind this whole time.

But surprisingly enough, even to him, he didn't feel surprise.

"So please just let me die, okay?"

Tatsuya nodded wordlessly.

She closed her eyes, her expression relieved.

Just like that, she stopped breathing.

Sanada, standing nearby, began to chant a sutra.

Kazama placed a hand on Tatsuya's shoulder.

As Tatsuya rose, his hand stayed.

No tears fell from the boy's eyes.

Mysteriously, the emotion of sadness was gone from his heart.

After hearing Honami Sakurai's final words, he realized there was no need to be sad.

"..." But at the time, he didn't understand that being able to erase his sadness with logic wasn't normal.



November 6, AD 2095

Yotsuba Main House

Sunroom

Several things had happened today that made him recall the events of three years ago.

That was probably why he remembered Honami Sakurai for the first time in a while.

His memory of her was steeped in regret. Even Tatsuya couldn't help thinking about it sometimes.

But he knew regret was the only thing he could do about it, and he had come to terms with that.

And if not for her sacrifice, Tatsuya might never have considered joining the Independent Magic Battalion and polishing his magical combat abilities.

This time, nobody had to die.

That idea allowed him to console himself with the fact that these three years hadn't been for naught.

And three years ago, he had already offered a silent prayer in tribute to the woman who had died to save him.

...That was why he was so surprised now.

When he saw the girl who came out with the tea snacks, Tatsuya very nearly raised his voice.

"...Is something the matter?"

“No, it’s nothing.”

The girl had actually asked Miyuki about it, not him—because her surprise was even greater than his.

He couldn’t blame her, either.

The face of the waitress outfit-clad girl was one and the same as Honami Sakurai’s.

Shortly after the little girl departed, Maya made her appearance in the sunroom. Hayama wasn’t with her, meaning this place was a private one.

The same reason had previously allowed Tatsuya to take a seat.

“What’s the matter, Miyuki?” asked Maya with a worried expression as soon as she sat down. “You look surprised about something.”

She was back to the “normal” Maya Yotsuba, a completely different person than when she and Tatsuya had confronted each other.

“Nothing... Aunt Maya, who was that girl?” asked Miyuki.

The woman nodded in understanding. “Oh, you mean Minami?” she said.

“Her name is Minami Sakurai—second generation of the Sakura series, and genetically, the twin of Honami Sakurai, the one who was your mother’s Guardian.”

Second generation meant she’d been born from an engineered-magician parent.

And if she was genetically her twin, that meant a first-generation specimen with the same genetic information as Honami’s had been her mother.

It made sense that her features looked just like her.

“She’s quite good at her job, too. I believe her latent abilities may rival the Saegusa twins. I’ve actually been training her to be your Guardian when the time for it comes. As an adult, a woman ends up in many situations where she absolutely needs a female bodyguard, after all.”

Miyuki seemed convinced, for the moment, by her aunt’s reasoning. Because she was right—in certain places, having only a male bodyguard would be

inconvenient.

But now that Maya had made her true intentions known to Tatsuya, he had steeled himself even more than before for the breakdown and clash that might come to pass in the future. If she wanted to make a tool of the girl with the same face as *her*, then that only made them less compatible.

However, at that moment, he had no way of knowing that such a breakdown, such a clash, was impossible.



August 17, AD 2092

Okinawa

Naha Airport

As I listened to the announcements of plane arrivals and departures, I recalled what had happened six days ago.

After Miss Sakurai went to back up Brother, there was nobody to control the screen for me, so I was stuck watching nothing but videos from the news.

An intense light, brighter than the sun, had suddenly erupted on the water's horizon.

Enemy ships had disappeared in the glow.

Waves had crashed onto the beach, scrubbing it clean, changing its shape.

Triumphal, victorious songs.

Those were the events we shared with the world.

What we didn't share with the world, and what only we knew, was that the light that had destroyed the enemy had been Brother's power.

He was now a strategic magician who could use a strategic-class spell, Material Burst, that converted matter into energy, then use that immense energy to consume all things in fire. Only we knew the extent of Brother's power—his true form.

Only we knew that Brother was the hero who had driven off the enemy.

And only we knew of the sad event that had accompanied it.

Miss Sakurai had never returned.

Her remains, submitted to the mass cremation at the combined funeral service for all the victims, were scattered out to sea, in accordance with her will.

Brother was the one to return her to the sea we all came from.

His face never betrayed a hint of pain.

He gently consoled me as I broke down crying.

Wasn't he sad? Or was that something he couldn't be?

No, it didn't matter either way.

I'd made up my mind.

As I watched Miss Sakurai reduced to ashes, I understood.

I had died back then.

I had lost the life Mother had given me and gained a new one from Brother.

All that I have, then, belonged to him.

"Miyuki, we're going inside soon."

"Yes, Brother."

At the sound of his voice, I stood up from the lounge sofa.

Mother didn't even seem to care about me calling him that anymore. I was sure it was distressing for her, but I no longer cared for her feelings on this matter.

As always, Brother carried everyone's things in and sat by himself in the normal seating, but I didn't care about that anymore, either.

Because Brother said he wanted to.

And what he says goes.

As my physical state was still not perfect, I took Mother's hand and we followed behind him.

Right now, my voice still wouldn't reach him. My words couldn't reach him.

But I'd already made up my mind.

——*Brother, I will go with you anywhere*——

THE UNTOUCHABLES
THE NIGHTMARE OF AD 2062

THE UNTOUCHABLES

THE NIGHTMARE OF AD 2062

Miya Yotsuba, eldest daughter of the Yotsuba, sat in her room, looking out at the western skies with a sour expression clouding her pretty face. She was currently twelve. She'd just started middle school that April, but the grievous expression on her face didn't suit her age.

She was worried about her missing twin sister, Maya Yotsuba. Three days ago, she had been visiting Taipei to attend a magicraft children exchange hosted by the Asian branch of the International Magic Association when she'd been kidnapped. It was clear to everyone it had been a violent kidnapping, rather than an abduction for reasons unknown. After all, Kouichi Saegusa, who had gone to Taipei with Maya, had suffered lacerations to his right hand and left leg, as well as broken bones and a wound severe enough to his right eye that he had lost it.

She was worried about Kouichi's health, too. Whatever the case may have been, Kouichi was her sister's boyfriend and fiancé. But it was only natural she'd be far more concerned over Maya, who had been taken away by the kidnappers, than Kouichi, who had escaped them, albeit with major wounds. And to be honest, she felt more anger and resentment toward Kouichi than worry. Over how useless he was, having crawled back by himself after her sister had been taken away.

She knew it wasn't Kouichi's fault. It was too cruel to expect that much out of a boy of only fourteen, and judging by the situation, she thought the kidnappers were more after Maya in the first place. In fact, you could say that Kouichi was entangled in her kidnapping and ended up losing an eye for it. But Miya wasn't old enough to let logic persuade her emotions. They still hadn't learned the kidnappers' identities, so if she didn't vent her anger on someone, she'd go crazy.

Suddenly, she felt a hurried presence in the hallway. Miya turned to the door before anyone knocked.

“Excuse me!”

The housemaid assigned to Miya called from the other side, her voice flustered. She’d been hearing voices of dismay, voices of panic, all over the mansion for these three days, but this one was subtly different from those—something like hope was mixed in.

“Please come in.”

The door opened not a moment after the words had left her mouth. Nevertheless, a servant employed by the Yotsuba main family would never do something so discourteous as barge into her room. The woman stopped dead in front of the doorframe and looked down. But as she looked back up, impatience evident on her face, she ran over to Miya.

“We’ve gotten word that Lady Maya has been rescued!”

As soon as Miya heard that, her mind bleached white. She had no later recollection of what she did after that. When she came to, she was approaching her father, Genzou Yotsuba, current family head.

“Father! Is it true that Maya has been found?!”

In the lounge they used for conferences for the main family members, amid the careful gazes of her uncles, aunts, and equally aged relatives, she demanded this from her father.

“It’s true. Juuzou just contacted us about it.”

“Uncle Kuroba?”

Hearing that made her troubled expression dissolve into relief. The Kuroba were a family of the Yotsuba clan, responsible for intelligence activities. Juuzou Kuroba was the branch family’s leader, as well as Genzou’s younger brother-in-law. If those were Juuzou’s words, they left no room for doubt.

But Miya soon remembered the reason for her rage and once again flared up at her father.

“Why did you not tell me about this?!”

“I don’t understand. Didn’t I just tell you?”

“Please don’t lie to me! If Maya was rescued today, then we must have known the culprits yesterday, at the very least! Why did you not tell me that?!”

“Because it wouldn’t have meant anything.”

“What...?!”

“There was no point in telling you. Or could you have helped save Maya?”

“I...”

Miya bit her lip, frustrated. She was still a child. She knew that well enough herself. She couldn’t have done anything even if they’d told her where Maya was being held captive. But still, she was family—was it wrong for her to feel like she wanted him to tell her where her sister was? Those were the complaints swirling within Miya’s mind.

“I didn’t tell you because I thought it would be better that way.”

But with her father’s next words, her displeasure was suppressed by dark clouds under the name *ominous premonition*.

“But not anymore. Miya, I need you to be strong.”

He was trying to tell her something bad. Something had happened to Maya. It wasn’t an omen now, it was conviction, and it rattled her mind. She was assailed by an impulse to cover her ears, but she did as her father said and rallied her nerves, waiting for his next words.

“Maya was found in Quanzhou.”

“In Dahan...?”

Dahan was a country built after the southern half of China became independent, soon after the outbreak of the world war. The Great Asian Alliance, which controlled the northern half of the Chinese mainland as well as the Korean Peninsula, had occupied Tsushima for six months two years ago, too, and ever since then, even if Japan and Dahan weren’t allied, they were cooperating militarily as common enemies of the GAA.

“She was being held captive in a Kunlun Institute branch laboratory in

Quanzhou.”

Miya’s face went white. The Kunlun Institute was a Dahan magician development agency. The bad rumors about that place never ended—different rumors than Lab Four, to which the Yotsuba still belonged and which was still virtually their master. Those rumors were of the sort that women especially couldn’t bear to look at head-on.

“Her wounds are grave—her physical wounds—but more worrying are her mental scars...”

Genzou’s tone, which had, until that point, been collected, began to break. Sounds like his teeth clenching, like holding back sobs, mixed into his words. Anger enough that teeth clenching was irresistible, and sadness such that sobs made their way up. That made Miya predict the worst.

“Maya was made into a human research specimen at the Kunlun Institute.”

“No!”

“Magician manufacturing experiments. Not only medicinal tests but actual—”

“I don’t need to hear any more!”

It didn’t matter how prepared she tried to make herself—she couldn’t bear any more than this. It was too painful to hear any more of what they’d done to her sister.

She turned a sharp, teary-eyed glare on her father. Then she suddenly opened her eyes wide, and tears immediately began to fall.

Her father’s hands were clenched so tightly they were bleeding.

She looked away. Her uncle was there. A wrath burned in his eyes like a blaze. She looked the other way. The eyes of her father’s younger cousin were erupting with the flames of hatred.

“Miya, this is something only you can do.”

“...Yes.”

Miya took several deep breaths to calm down. Everyone was angry for her sister. That was a tiny bit of salvation for her, and she just barely managed to

clamp down on her sanity.

“Her mind is shut down right now. Her eyes are open, but she doesn’t respond to anyone. She hasn’t tried to do anything herself—she’s only letting them heal her wounds.”

Miya clenched her back teeth. That was the only way she prevented the cry from coming out.

“Miya, steal her mental sensations from these past three days using your magic.”

Miya’s eyes went wide, and she took a very deep breath.

“I would be glad to—if I could.”

Her voice was level, emotion sparse. By suppressing her emotions, she eventually gave her answer.

“But my magic is mental construction interference. I interfere with the makeup of people’s minds—I can’t take memories away.”

Her answer: that she didn’t have the power to steal memories.

“I’m not asking you to take her memories. If you did and she ever remembered what happened to her, I’m not sure she would stay sane. It would be like holding on to a bomb, never knowing when it will explode.”

But Genzou understood she didn’t have the power to manipulate memories. He was ordering her to do this anyway.

“Don’t steal her memories—separate them from her emotions. Convert her experiential memory into semantic memory so that she can’t link raw emotion to her memories of being used as a human test subject.”

Ordering her not to steal her memories but the sense of realism attached to them.

“Father, I can’t do something that precise. Even if I could convert all her experiential memory into semantic memory, doing it only to her memories for the past three days is... I can’t interfere with the memories themselves, so I can’t do it.”

Miya answered with eyes averted. With her insight—which was sharp beyond her years—she knew how effective her father’s order would be. That was exactly why she felt frustrated with herself, with her own powerlessness.

“Then, change all her experience into knowledge.”

“What?!”

She stared at him in utter disbelief. But the maximum criticism in his daughter’s eyes didn’t make him waver at all.

“Miya, I understand how you feel. We both feel regret and guilt about stealing her memories. But at this rate, Maya’s heart will break for good.”

“.....”

“Maya will arrive at this mansion tomorrow. Miya, I want you to look at her when she returns and then make your own choice. Whatever conclusion you come to, I will take all the blame for it.”

Miya bowed silently and took her leave from her father.

After his daughter had left, Genzou looked around at the rest of the clan gathered in the lounge.

Everyone returned his gaze with a nod.

“We’re up against the main magical headquarters of Dahan. We’re merely the product of Lab Four, one of several laboratories. We’re vastly outnumbered.”

First, Genzou explained the horribly disadvantageous conditions of their situation. The Kunlun Institute was the center of the mainland’s magical research from before the north-south split. Because the institute was placed in Dahan, the GAA had lost most of their modern magic know-how. Because of that, despite Dahan’s critical lack of resources, they were still holding out against the GAA. In a way, the Kunlun Institute was the core of Dahan’s military strength.

“But I cannot overlook this act of savagery toward us. We may be weapons, but we are not slaves. And we’re certainly not livestock. That was why we made this lab, which created us, into our own possession,” declared Genzou, garnering another nod from everyone present.

“This is a personal grudge. Necessary retribution for the parent of a soiled daughter to get even. But that’s not all it is. I want to show our pride as magicians to the foolish nation that considers us slaves and livestock.”

“Lord Genzou...”

The one who opened his mouth belonged to the oldest generation in attendance—Genzou’s uncle.

“I don’t consider this Maya’s tragedy alone. The entire Yotsuba family has been humiliated and our dignity trampled.”

“Cousin...”

The next to seek permission to speak was a female cousin of Genzou’s, ten years younger than him.

“I have a daughter, too. I can’t think of this as someone else’s problem. She hasn’t even gone to school yet, but when I think about her future, I can’t overlook such an unjust tragedy.”

“We are weapons. We are assassins.”

A voice rose from the back seats.

“Perhaps it’s absurd for us to preach humanity. I have no doubt those we have killed sit at the bottom of hell, laughing at us for our selfishness. But who the hell cares?!”

The eyes of all present were filled with understanding and consent.

“Give me the order, my lord! Allow me to avenge your daughter!”

“Stand aside, fledgling.”

That voice came from beside Genzou.

“Someone as inexperienced as you would only die a dog’s death. Please give this foolish brother of yours the order. I will show those mainland bastards no less than hell.”

“Lord Genzou, we all feel as you do.”

“Death to all those involved in Maya’s kidnapping!”

“Ruin to the mainland magicians, the pawns of her disgrace!”

“Please leave the Japanese government to me. I will see to it that any who would crow about diplomacy or military cooperation are silenced at once.”

Genzou bowed deeply to all those gathered here.

And then he brought his face back up and declared:

“Our enemy is the Kunlun Institute—and the government of Dahan. With all the forces of the Yotsuba at our disposal, we will annihilate them.”



“...Maya? ...Maya?”

A voice called to her. She felt as though she hadn’t heard this voice in a long time—but for some reason, she felt no nostalgia connected to it.

She opened her eyes. There stood a sickroom she long knew and the face of a twin sister, whom she’d known ever since she could remember.

“Miya... Is this the sickroom in Lab Four?”

The first words out of Maya’s mouth both relieved Miya and made her want to cry.

“Yes, Miya. How do you feel? Do you have a headache?”

Asked by her older sister, Maya gave her a dubious expression.

“No... No headache. I’m fully awake, and my memories are clear.”

At Maya’s one word, *memories*, Miya’s expression hardened.

Maya looked up, face confused, at Miya, who was gazing at her with frightened eyes.

“Miya, I was... I was raped.”

Miya turned away from Maya, who spoke detachedly.

“And they tinkered in my body. They messed everything up, even inside me. Not a single part of my body hasn’t been soiled by their hands.”

Miya pushed her hands onto her knees. As though making it impossible for her body, about to stand up and run away, to flee from atop the stool upon

which she sat.

“I remember all of it. So why don’t I feel anything about it? All I can think is how it’s terrible or sad, like I saw a movie. Even though it all happened to me.”

Miya couldn’t look up at her.

“Miya...”

But Maya wouldn’t look away from her sister.

“What did you do to me?”

“.....”

“Miya?”

“...I converted your memories.”

As though finally resigned, Miya began to talk, head down.

“There are a bunch of different ways your mind stores memory. It’s not all just one piece. The part that remembers experiences and the memories that turn into knowledge of things like words and images have different containers.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine that... But if you say so, Miya, then I’m sure that’s true.”

Even in the Yotsuba clan, only Miya possessed this magic of mental construction interference. Miya, who could change a person’s mental makeup, could also perceive mental makeup. That was something only Miya knew how to do, but it was clear that Maya understood.

“I can’t look inside those containers. I don’t know what memories are inside them. All I can know is whether the memory in the container is an experience or knowledge.”

“...And?”

At this stage, Maya had a dim guess of what her sister wanted to say. But she let Miya say it.

“Maya, I didn’t know what you had experienced. But I knew without magic that your heart was about to break for good. So I...”

“So you what?”

Miya stammered because it was hard to endure putting it into words. Still, Maya wanted her sister to explain what she did from her own mouth.

“...I changed your experiences into knowledge. I remade your memories... I turned the container storing your experiences into a container storing your memories.”

“I see...”

That was all Maya said.

She didn’t criticize her sister.

Miya nervously started to glance up and saw Maya looking at the opposite wall.

“Everything about me is just data now, huh?”

The girl’s words plunged into Miya’s heart.

“My happiness, anger, the things I had fun doing, the things that made me sad, all data...”

And still, Miya couldn’t let herself run away from here.

“You’re right—I wouldn’t have been able to endure the memories of my kidnapping. At that rate, my heart would have died.”

“Maya...”

“So before the memories of my disgrace could kill me, you did it instead, didn’t you?”

“?!”

Miya caught her breath.

Maya once again turned to look at Miya.

“Well, that’s what happened, isn’t it? People are made by their experiences. I had a past self, and now I have a current self.”

Miya tried to avert her eyes. But her sister’s gaze wouldn’t allow it.

“Changing experiences into simple knowledge is the same as turning the past

into data. Everything about me from before today has vanished, changed into something that isn't me, right?"

Maya's eyes stabbed deep into Miya's heart.

"You killed who I was before today, didn't you?"

Miya rose from her stool. She turned on her heels, then ran for the door as fast as her legs could carry her.

She ran away from Maya.

Without being able to apologize.

Without being thanked.

Without being able to even share tears.

...There would never again come a chance for them to regain the bond between them that was broken this day.



Six months later: The nightmarish days of the Kunlun Institute and the Dahan government continued.

A certain laboratory had been wiped out, all of its staff and attached magicians gone in a night.

At the base, which had an army, people started killing one another suddenly, and the last one had put a bullet in his own head and died.

The buildings that the government's military/government-related agencies occupied were plowed into by jet fighters from their own forces and destroyed. There were zero survivors.

Everyone inside some of the research facilities died, having suffocated from oxygen deprivation. In one case, everyone had been stabbed to death before anyone noticed it. That incident had occurred in a secret salon that government officials used, and on that day, it just so happened that many of the important figures in the Dahan government were gathered there.

They hadn't a single clue of the culprit. In some cases where they investigated a suspect, the investigators vanished, not even leaving corpses behind. Their

remains, without exception, vanished.

It was indeed a nightmare.

And exactly six months after the first mystery occurred, the nightmare showed its face, finally.

With all its support branches and local agencies crushed, the only thing that remained was the Kunlun Institute headquarters. Three magicians had attacked the fortress defended by Dahan magicians.

Just three. In contrast, the magicians stationed at Kunlun Institute were three hundred. Once boasting a staff of three thousand people, the Dahan magic regiment, through deaths and desertion, had whittled down to just one-tenth of that.

“My name is Genzou Yotsuba.”

A man in his early middle age, who had slashed the magicians guarding the front gate in the blink of an eye, gave his name in Japanese.

The scientists and magicians gathered at the headquarters, plus the influential persons who had evacuated here, all watched Genzou on the screen.

“In order to satisfy a grudge, you will all die. This is revenge for my daughter, whose future you stole.”

Thus did Genzou declare, swinging a knife horizontally toward the camera.

All five hundred people watching the screen grabbed at their necks at once. They were attacked by illusions of their own heads being cut off, and when they found them still attached, they breathed sighs of relief. With relaxed hearts, they looked back to see that the screen was empty.

The research theme of Lab Four, which spawned the Yotsuba clan, was “the bestowal and improvement of magical abilities from mental reconstruction, using mental interference magic.” For that goal, Lab Four first gathered people with unique mental interference-type abilities. If some among them were the real thing who could change entire personalities, others were like street magicians who could do nothing but show phantomlike illusions. They strengthened the minds of those mental interference ability specialists, weeded

them out, and directly reconstructed the magic-calculation regions of the magicians who had become the elements with those abilities. That was the magician development process adopted by Lab Four.

The Yotsuba, born as a result of that, necessarily connoted two types of magicians. The first were those whose mental interference-type abilities were strengthened at birth. The second were those born equipped with powerful, distorted magic-calculation regions. These two types stood side by side, mingled, and formed the Yotsuba. Even in directly related family members, these two properties would manifest at random. For example, Miya strongly inherited the characteristics of the former, able to control mental interference magic that was only hers. Meanwhile, Maya was a typical instance of the latter, who in exchange for not possessing mental interference-type abilities was born possessing extremely nonstandard magic.

Right now, the three attacking the Kunlun Institute were all users of strong, unique mental interference magic.

One was a user of magic who could immobilize a person's awareness. His magic, using five sense-based awareness as a medium, could implant a fixed notion of a certain state being maintained. The effects lasted nine minutes. For example, say somebody witnessed him hiding somewhere. It didn't matter if it was with physical eyes or on video, nor if it was one person or a thousand. He used their visual information of having seen him as a medium to cast his magic on them, and for nine minutes, they would never doubt that he'd moved away from behind cover. Even if he left the shadows and walked slowly in front of them, anyone trapped by his spell would continue to think he was hiding there. Even if a loud alarm rang, they would never connect that sound to him.

Another was a user of magic who could dominate someone's willpower. It lasted a maximum of one minute, could target up to seven people, and had an effective area of up to sixty-six feet. Although it had the restriction of not working against those possessing magic interference powers that were better than his, and he was unable to order them to hurt themselves, once a person fell under the spell's effects, they would never be able to disobey his commands. Because the commands were sent as ideas with psionic waves, they could even travel through thick walls, and language barriers didn't pose a

problem, either. It lasted anywhere from a few seconds to one minute. This spell, which could surely make someone execute an order, had been reported in two other cases outside Japan and was called One Command.

With those two spells together, the invaders were easily able to break into the fortresslike laboratory interior. They purposely let themselves be caught on the surveillance cameras, immediately pretending to flee. By doing that, out of the three invaders, it would make them think the two aside from Genzou were still outside. Then they would deliver a One Command to the security from across the door and have them open it. Of course, once it was open, the security officers had outlived their usefulness. Through a sequence of suggestion and cleanup, they arrived within nine minutes at their destination—the security control room.

The pair got to work right away. In exchange for having talent in powerful mental interference magic, they had only average magic power when it came to typed magic for interfering with physical phenomena. If the nine minutes' spell ran out and the magicians guarding the laboratory forced their way in, they would be greatly outnumbered and taken out for sure. Going by the book, which had been directly written into their brains—more precisely, the data was sent directly to their mind via electric signals to the brain, and they were conditioned so that they could refer to that data at any time through electric impulses—they shut down all the laboratory's security systems.

They did it right in the nick of time, too. Not a few seconds after they finished their work they were attacked by over ten Dahanese magicians, all wearing matching, dully shining metal bands around their heads. There was an intense exchange of gunfire and magic that lasted just a few moments—and then the control room was rendered unusable by a fierce wave of heat and explosions.

Genzou realized his comrades had blown themselves up after crossing two of the bulkheads left wide open by the security systems going down. It was self-immolation through a conditional activation spell engraved into their bodies beforehand, so that they wouldn't leave any proof or give them any genetic samples. His magic sense had informed him that the spell had activated.

...I'm sorry.

He gave a short, two-word apology to them in his mind. As he'd made clear himself, this battle had started with his own personal grudge. But those in the clan had come with him of their own accord. Perhaps apologizing to the sacrifices made a mockery of their determination—but even knowing that, he couldn't help feeling sorry for his comrades who had gone before him.

The number of dead in the Yotsuba clan from this battle numbered twenty-nine. That was half of the combat magicians the Yotsuba had. However, the enemy's dead, including magicians, numbered three thousand five hundred. It wasn't worth it, thought Genzou. The Yotsuba magicians weren't cheap enough that burying just 120 times their number in enemies would net them any change. Genzou resolved himself—he had to balance the account himself.

Meanwhile, as he thought, his body kept moving. The Kunlun Institute's head director—he was today's target. He kept running and running toward the center of the labs, making his way down the hallways, now silent from the security systems going down. All who stood in his way, both magicians and non-magicians, lost their lives at a single swing of his blade. Normally magic-calculation regions couldn't be felt consciously, but Genzou could tell his was overheating, reaching its limit. If he kept on going, his mind would burn out. But he couldn't stop here.

When he came to the final door, he didn't stop; he accelerated farther.

The presence of magic swelled within the room.

There were probably four inside who rivaled him in magical ability: the head director and his confederates in power. With the true enemies Genzou sought in front, their bodyguards' tried to fire their magic at Genzou.

But their spells didn't complete.

Genzou's spell was faster.

The skill of the four magicians and Genzou was about equal. Despite that, though, Genzou was one if not two steps ahead of them—because his spell was already being activated.

Genzou held his knife horizontally. The next expected motion would be a quick snap, mowing across. Before the blade was swung, the four enemy

magicians fell, blood spurting from their necks.

Genzou's spell: Grim Reaper. It was a mental interference spell that triggered a specific image in an opponent's mind. That image was death. A spell that applied strong suggestion by displaying that image's symbol to an opponent he'd already given the image of death to. He could simply show the initial image one-sidedly; either was fine. It didn't matter whether it was direct or indirect—neither distance nor time was an obstacle. As long as the opponent simply carried that image in their mind, he would amplify it by hundreds of times and change it into a suggestion that even affected the flesh.

Because the suggestion was something brought on by their own memories, no form of defense meant anything. Anyone who confronted Genzou would be killed, twice, by themselves. However, to activate this magic, Grim Reaper, it was necessary to directly meet the opponent. The spell formed only when Genzou perceived an enemy and the enemy perceived Genzou. It was a spell that exhibited effects only after he himself jumped into the jaws of death.

Without wasting time making sure the four magicians had died, Genzou again swiped his knife horizontally. The Kunlun Institute's head director, the Dahanese government's military director, and the other Dahanese politicians trembling in the room all crumpled to the floor, blood spurting from their necks.

"This is disappointing," muttered Genzou, looking down on the mess of dead bodies spread before him. For the past six months, they'd been closing in slowly from the outside. He was confident they'd given them enough fear. But finally finishing everything up like this made him feel like they should have waited to kill them until they'd suffered a little more.

Then, suddenly—

Feeling vertigo, he fell to a knee.

His head hurt like it was going to split open.

No...

In his agony, Genzou realized this pain wasn't something brought on by his physical body but something backflowing from his mind. It had passed its limit after repetitive usage of Grim Reaper.

Genzou realized it was time for him to die.

I can no longer return to Japan.

There was no proof. Nobody had yet objectively observed the limits of a magic-calculation region. But Genzou knew it for sure. He controlled images of death, and now he felt closer to it than ever before.

He put his weight on his quivering knee and stood up. Over a hundred core research personnel and magicians still remained in this laboratory.

Suppose I'll take some of them as fare across the Sanzu River.

Genzou smirked, revealing his teeth.

Miya, Maya...I'm sorry.

Apologizing in his heart to the two beloved daughters he'd never see again, he ran off in search of his next prey.

That was how the Yotsuba family's revenge ended. Only tragedy remained in its wake.

Maya Yotsuba, due to the wounds she had sustained, lost her reproductive capabilities. Even regenerative medicine, which had advanced to the point of creating limbs for transplants, was unable to recover lost reproductive functions.

The Yotsuba family proposed to the Saegusa an annulment of Maya and Kouichi's engagement. Kouichi Saegusa had forever lost his right eye and his beloved at the same time. For his part, he could have had a new eye constructed for himself using cloning technology. But he refused, saying he couldn't live on unharmed alone, as though nothing had ever happened.

After this incident, Miya used her mental interference magic frequently and excessively, as if to punish herself, and before she was twenty, her body failed her. She spent ten years in and out of hospitals, recuperating from it.

The Yotsuba decided to place exclusive bodyguards with all those in the clan with especially great magical gifts, lest they see a repeat of the tragedy that had befallen Maya. Instead of hiring temporary guards with money to do the job, they created the Guardians—beings who would spend their entire lives as

bodyguards, risking themselves for that duty.

Thirty died on the Yotsuba side during their shadow fight with Dahan. They had lost half of their combat forces, as well as their leader.

On the other hand, approximately four thousand Dahanese died. For just thirty sacrifices, the Yotsuba clan had assassinated four thousand ministers, senior government officials, commissioned officers, magicians, and scientists. They had wiped out the Chinese mainland's research into modern magic.

Due to the damage, Dahan internally collapsed one year later, and the GAA reunified the Chinese mainland.

The end of the north-south conflict in East Asia was tied to the end of the worldwide war outbreaks covering the northern hemisphere.

The great war had ended.

And those who knew the truth behind Dahan's ruination now feared the Yotsuba as the Untouchables.

AFTERWORD

Thank you, truly, for reading another volume of *The Irregular at Magic High School*. For everyone who has just purchased it for the first time, I'll be looking forward to your continued support in the future, if it pleases you.

This eighth volume consists of the "Reminiscence Arc," placed as a sort of episode zero, and a short story that goes back even further. I actually wrote that short story, "The Untouchables," as a preamble to the "Reminiscence Arc," which is why it's fairly short even for a short story. Putting it at the end of the book was thanks to my editor's advice, and I do think this ordering makes the differences between Miya and the Yotsuba much more distinct.

Speaking of short, when I first submitted the draft for this book, I asked my editor if it was too short. The question surprised him; he told me physical books were supposed to be about this length. That was my ignorance as someone still early in his career. I'll need to reflect on my mistake...though even if I'm sorry for it, I may not be able to put that knowledge to good use in the next book.

It isn't as though I believe it's more worth it to read longer books. It just so happens that whenever I finish something, it ends up being long. With things like Dengeki Bunko's magazine serializations, I can create a story short enough, since I'm conscious of the character count from the beginning. But when I'm not thinking much about character limits, I tend to cram a lot in.

One good example (or perhaps it's a bad example) is the audio drama on sale this month. When they requested that I draft the script for a drama CD, I suggested it be the storyline from the past section of the "Reminiscence Arc." They agreed, which I'm thankful for, and I mistook that for making the entire past section of the arc into a drama. I knew the whole thing would never fit on a single CD but figured, blissfully ignorant to cost concerns, that they could just make it three or four disks long.

Luckily for me, they could handle it with a normal DVD, but I was on the edge of my seat until the media issue was decided. I'm sure the people working on its production were worse off than I was—so I'd like to take a moment and apologize for that again.

Still, I believe that thanks to the strenuous efforts of those concerned, we've created an audio drama that all the fans will be able to fully enjoy.

This sort of turned into an advertisement for the audio drama CD, but of course, I think you'll be satisfied with this book, too—and I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that those who purchased it thought it was interesting.

Please look forward to Volume 9, "Visitor Arc (1)."

(Tsutomu Sato)

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